

- HIGH - BENTON

WILLIAM HEYLIGER

NY PUBLIC LIBRARY THE BRANCH LIBRARIES



3 3333 08087 9873

REFERENCE *rec*

E 149204 CH-

Heyliger
High Benton

7

Large
C H

5



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2007 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

HIGH BENTON

By WILLIAM HEYLIGER

WILDCAT
RIVER MAN
BACKFIELD PLAY
THE MILL IN THE WOODS
STEVE MERRILL: ENGINEER
BACKFIELD COMET
THE SILVER RUN
RITCHIE OF THE NEWS
THE GALLANT CROSBY
JOHNNY BREE
THE BUILDER OF THE DAM
THE MACKLIN BROTHERS
THE MAKING OF PETER CRAY
THE FIGHTING CAPTAIN
DORSET'S TWISTER
QUINBY AND SON
THE SPIRIT OF THE LEADER
DAN'S TOMORROW
HIGH BENTON
HIGH BENTON—WORKER
DARK CONQUEST: A NOVEL
BRAVE YEARS: A NOVEL

Fairview Series

CAPTAIN FAIR AND SQUARE
THE COUNTY PENNANT
FIGHTING FOR FAIRVIEW

St. Mary's Series

BARTLEY, FRESHMAN PITCHER
STRIKE THREE!
THE CAPTAIN OF THE NINE
AGAINST ODDS
OFF SIDE

Boy Scouts Series

DON STRONG OF THE WOLF PATROL
DON STRONG, PATROL LEADER
DON STRONG, AMERICAN

Lansing Series

BATTER UP STRAIGHT AHEAD
FAIR PLAY



"WRITE THAT . . . AND THE WHOLE SCHOOL WILL WONDER"

HIGH BENTON

BY

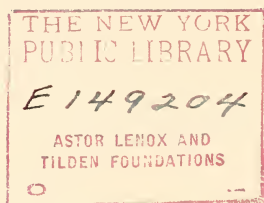
WILLIAM HEYLIGER

AUTHOR OF "FIGHTING FOR FAIRVIEW," "DON STRONG,
PATROL LEADER," "THE COUNTY PENNANT,"
"CAPTAIN FAIR AND SQUARE," ETC.



NEW YORK
PUBLIC
LIBRARY

D. APPLETON-CENTURY COMPANY
INCORPORATED
NEW YORK LONDON
1939



COPYRIGHT, 1919, BY
D. APPLETON AND COMPANY

Copyright, 1919, by
THE SPRAGUE PUBLISHING COMPANY

All rights reserved. This book, or parts thereof, must not be reproduced in any form without permission of the publishers.

ROY W. B.
J. B.
V. B.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

TO
WALTER P. McGUIRE
MANAGING EDITOR OF *THE AMERICAN BOY*
Whose mind first conceived
this story and whose faith inspired it
THIS BOOK IS AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. TRAMP PASSES JUDGMENT	1
II. TOO MANY FISH	12
III. THE JITNEY MAN.	28
IV. THE IVY CLUB	38
V. TWO BELOW ZERO	66
VI. THE IVY CLUB DISBANDS	108
VII. DIVIDING PATHS	131
VIII. JOURNEY'S END	177
IX. NEW THOUGHTS	191
X. THE VOICE OF AMERICA	226
XI. "NOT QUALIFIED"	255
XII. STEVE FINDS THE ROAD	283
XIII. THE GOAL	303

HIGH BENTON

CHAPTER I

TRAMP PASSES JUDGMENT

EVERYTHING about the place spoke comfortably of home. Along the side fences the flowerbeds were trained and weeded. The hedge across the front was trimly clipped, and the lawn was richly green from many hosings. The windows of the house were open, the shades were evenly drawn, and summer curtains stirred faintly in the darkened recesses of the rooms. The striped porch awning was suggestive of drowsy, shaded afternoons. And mouth-wateringly pleasant on the balmy air was the smell of apple pies, sugared and spiced, baking in the oven.

It was evident, too, that a boy lived in the house. A mower, with fresh grass clinging to its blades, was tumbled over on its side. A bicycle with battered handle bars leaned against the porch. A baseball lay where somebody might step on it and break

HIGH BENTON

his neck. And on the sidewalk in front of the hedge was scrawled in white chalk:

"Gregor Helsing licked Steve Benton yesterday."

Plainly, then, Steve Benton was the boy who lived here.

Around at the side of the house, stretched sleepily in the sun, was as disreputable looking a dog as one would have found in the whole state. In color it was a dirty, muddy, mongrel-yellow; and a patch of hair, hanging from one side of its forehead, gave it a lop-sided, one-eyed look. Its ears were not mates, for whereas one stuck up sharp like the ear of a rat terrier, one hung limp in the middle like the ear of a mournful hound. Once it had probably had a whole tail, but now only a stiff, four-inch stump was left. Viewed from any angle, the animal seemed a misfit and a joke. A man would not have given it house-room. But a boy——

Plainly, then, this was Steve Benton's dog.

From the kitchen came a woman's voice. "Steve! Where are you?"

"Upstairs, mom."

"Did you finish the lawn?"

"Yep."

"Put the mower away?"

"N—no; I will in a minute." The minute became ten minutes.

"Steve!"

TRAMP PASSES JUDGMENT

The boy came downstairs. Something appeared to lay heavy on his mind.

"Mother, did you see anybody writing on our sidewalk?"

"Writing? Writing what?"

"Just writing. Did you see any of the fellows hanging around?"

"No; why?"

"Oh, nothing." He went out-of-doors, and the dog bounded to its feet and greeted him with joyous, high-pitched yelps.

"Oh, blame it all, Tramp, keep still."

The yelping grew louder.

"All right, you old fool; bark your head off."

Tramp did.

"Gosh!" Steve said bitterly, "I surely had a brain-storm the day I adopted *you*." But his hand, through force of habit, patted the dog's head.

From where the mower lay he could see those galling chalk marks on the sidewalk. His affair with Gregor had been a scuffle, not a fight—Gregor had been too strong for him. For more than an hour he had been biting on the problem of who had written the message. It would be easy to smudge the marks with his shoes and then hose the sidewalk; but whoever had done the writing might be concealed at some point of vantage watching to see his discomfiture. He decided to ignore the scrawl.

HIGH BENTON

Suddenly, as he stooped to right the mower, he regretted his decision. A man whose face was pale and tired and whose eyes, black as night, were sunk in behind high cheek bones, was coming slowly down the street. He walked with the aid of a heavy cane, and one foot dragged after the other as though it were so much dead weight.

There was about him an atmosphere of mystery. He carried the manner of one who brooded strange thoughts. Two years before he had come to Waterford as principal of the high school. He possessed a rare gift for teaching. That much Waterford knew at the end of a month. At the end of two years it knew little more save this—that often, in the dark uncanny hours after midnight, Albert Lane was seen dragging his bad foot through the streets of the town as though he could not rest.

The principal's course would lead him directly to the chalk writing. Steve was destined to enter high school next September—unless he could get out of it—and he did not want the man to see what was written there. If he did have to go to high school he did not want to start with a reputation as a picker of fights.

“Good-afternoon, Mr. Lane,” he said. Perhaps, if he could maintain a conversation, the writing would pass unnoticed.

“Good-afternoon,” said the principal absently, and bent on him those deep, black eyes. He did not

TRAMP PASSES JUDGMENT

pause in his slow walk. Steve had begun to smile. Slowly the smile faded, and he watched Mr. Lane go down the street.

"Gosh!" said Steve in awe, "he looks as though he's seeing something far, far away." Thoughtfully the boy pushed the mower around to the rear. Was it true, as some whispered, that Mr. Lane carried a grave secret?

There was a vegetable garden on either side of the yard, and in back of that a strip of heavy timber land. Steve followed a footpath through the trees. Another moment and he came out on an old-time, weed-grown wagon road. Evidently it had been abandoned for years, for the wheel-ruts were almost filled level. On the other side of this road, standing as though waiting for some ghostly soldier of the Revolution to ride up to its door, was a low, grim, weather-beaten structure of stone.

This was the Hiding House.

When Mr. Benton had bought the place, the strip of timber and the stone building had gone with the land. Why the structure was known as the Hiding House no one could say. Everything about it spoke of a past generation—its decaying roof, sagging at one corner; its stout, square windows, its dowered rafters and timbers, its one big room that once had been curtained off into sections, and its double doors of solid, virgin oak. Over it all was a hushed air of desertion. And there was an air of tragedy,

HIGH BENTON

too, in the aged, dust-gray holes in the wood above one of the windows—holes that had been made by pistol bullets.

Whatever its former history, the Hiding House was now but a work-shop and a store-room for odds and ends. Steve stood the mower in its place. Tramp smelled around the floor and wormed his way into dark corners. Presently he began to growl and claw.

“Rats?” Steve said hopefully.

The dog’s hair bristled.

The boy went over to investigate. “Oh, blame it all,” he said in disgust, “that’s the same hole you’ve been worrying for six months.”

From a work-bench under a window he took an oar shaped out of clear white ash. He had worked on that oar for weeks, and now it was finished with the exception of smoothing the hand-grip. Whistling shrilly, he fell to with sandpaper. Bit by bit the surface became finer. His fingers caressed it, and cupped it into his palm. He was filled with a longing to go out next day and feel the pull of that oar against the tide.

A long whistle came from over toward the timber patch, followed by two short blasts.

Steve answered the call. Tramp lost all interest in the rat-hole. A shadow fell across the door, and the dog shifted ground and came close to his master.

Into the Hiding House came a fat, soft, blowsy-

TRAMP PASSES JUDGMENT

looking boy of fourteen. His tie was pulled crooked, his hair was tousled, and judging by appearances he had slept in his clothes last night and had not bothered to smooth them out this morning. He had a wrinkled, mussed-up, careless look.

"Hear about Freckles Smith?" he demanded excitedly. "He's got a job in the movies."

Steve was only mildly interested. "Collecting tickets at the Arcade? I could have had *that* job."

"A real movie job," cried the newcomer; "acting. Fifteen dollars a week. I saw the contract. My mother says his mother will go down and meet the trains and show it to everybody. He's going to act in a real moving picture. Mr. Todd said he always knew moving picture people were crazy."

This was stunning news. The oar lay neglected in Steve's hands. Freckles Smith, of all Waterford boys, to fall into a fortune like that! Fif—

"Did you say fifteen dollars, Gabby?"

"You bet I did," Gabby Watson answered. "Mr. Todd's right the way he talks about school education and teachers. There's a fellow who can't go to high school next September because he failed in his eighth-grade exams. Now look what he gets! There's education for you."

Steve did not care to discuss the examinations of two weeks ago. He had just managed to squeeze through with seventy-one per cent. His father had said some things that he still remembered.

HIGH BENTON

"Talk about luck!" Gabby went on. "He didn't have to move to get the job. He was fishing from the trolley bridge, and an automobile came along and stopped. My mother says you can't blame people for stopping to look at Freckles. One man says, 'Hey, sonny; want to be a moving picture actor?' They put him in the car and took him home and had a talk with his mother. Then they signed the contract. Mrs. Smith said the man said it would be a big picture."

Steve sighed. His father had told him, the day he had brought home his examination papers, of the four years of high school that lay ahead. He didn't want to go. Books were dull. Perhaps if he could find a good job——

"That studio on the county road?" he asked thoughtfully.

Gabby nodded. "The Triumph Film Company. I saw it on the contract."

Steve gave the oar a few more rubs. "Say, Gabby, if they need a couple more fellows——"

"Let's try it to-morrow," Gabby said eagerly.

While the afternoon waned they talked of what the future might hold for them. Everybody knew that moving picture actors earned lots of money, and had automobiles, and servants, and everything. And then, some day, the pictures in which they appeared would come to the Waterford Arcade.

"I bet that will make people sit up," said Gabby.

TRAMP PASSES JUDGMENT

He reached a hand toward Tramp, and the dog growled and retreated. "Mutt!" he said. The dog showed its teeth.

The oar needed a little more rubbing. Gabby soon tired of watching and walked over to the wide-bellied fireplace. He was seized with a desire to find out if he could see daylight up the chimney. When he arose from his knees his pants and his shoes were coated with the white dust of long dead fires. He slapped his pants and brushed his shoes clean by rubbing them on the backs of his stockings.

"When are you going to get through, Steve?"

"Through now," said Steve. The grip nestled into his hand exactly right. To-morrow he'd get his boat—— Oh! He was forgetting. To-morrow he was to go to the moving picture studio on the county road.

"What time to-morrow, Gabby?"

"Eight o'clock."

"N—no. I must get in things from the store."

"Oh, bother. Well, make it nine o'clock. Say, I saw Mr. Lane to-day walking around again. My mother says he just snoops around that way to see what he can."

Steve turned this in his mind as they left the Hiding House and passed through the timber fringe. It was a startling suggestion. All at once Tramp ran forward with a welcoming bark.

"Say," said Gabby in a low voice, "there's your

HIGH BENTON

father." His whole bearing became furtive and uneasy. Inch by inch he worked his way off the path and on to the grass.

"Hello, Mr. Benton," he said.

"Hello," Mr. Benton said gravely. His eyes went to Steve and back to the visitor. Gabby hurried past and almost stepped on the dog. Tramp's growl was menacing. Gabby changed his course quickly and went on toward the street, a flustered and untidy boy.

"See you to-morrow, Steve," he called.

Mr. Benton's gaze continued to follow him. "Who's that, Steve? I've seen him before."

"That's Gabby Watson, dad."

"Gabby? Nice name. What's he been up to?"

"Nothing. We were talking in the Hiding House."

"Nothing? Humph! He acts like a boy who knows he's guilty of something. Are you and Gabby very friendly?"

"Well—yes."

"Tramp doesn't like him."

Steve loved his dog, but he also had a boyish sense of loyalty to a friend. If he and Gabby were going to join fortunes they would have to stand by one another.

"Oh, dogs are like that sometimes, dad."

Mr. Benton held out his newspaper, and Tramp

TRAMP PASSES JUDGMENT

took it in his mouth and ran around to deliver it to Mrs. Benton at the kitchen door. "I've found, Steve," he said, "that you can generally trust a dog."

CHAPTER II

TOO MANY FISH

THE idea of becoming an actor for the Triumph Film Company was topmost in Steve's mind when he sat down to supper. Looking at his father across the pleasant table he found it difficult to broach the subject. His father had a habit of combating rosy, dazzling plans with cold, hard facts.

After supper Mr. Benton went out-of-doors to spray the rosebushes. Steve stayed right at his elbow trying to pluck up enough courage to put his fate to the test. Just as he was on the point of speaking a voice sounded from the road.

"Hello, John! Busy?"

His father handed him the spray pump. "Finish these, Steve." Then to the visitor: "Hello, Peter! Come right in."

The men took seats on the porch. Steve sprayed furiously. He wanted to get through and occupy a silent place on the steps. Peter Tarkan's visits had, to him, all the thrill of adventure. Mr. Tarkan had traveled about the world, down south for

TOO MANY FISH

fishing, up north for hunting, and across to Europe on business. He was President of the Board of Education, and the president, too, of the Tarkan-Boylert Company, Waterford's principal business asset. Steve had a vague idea that he would go to work for that company some day—that is, if he did not become a celebrated actor with his picture in newspapers and in store windows.

In his eagerness not to miss anything he skipped the last bush and found an obscure seat. His father and Mr. Tarkan, as real American citizens, had a vivid interest in their country and its government. To-night they talked of the coming fall election for congress, of candidates, and of grave, absorbing issues. The discussion thrilled him in a way that he could not understand. When they spoke of "the party" his mind formed a picture of powerful, dignified men of lofty purpose like the men who had gathered at Philadelphia and had signed the Declaration of Independence. When they spoke of "the people" he had an impression of a force infinitely mightier, a force shadowy and irresistible. The people of the United States of America! Sitting crouched, Steve's heart leaped as it had leaped when first he had read of Lexington and Concord.

At last the conference was over. He made way as Mr. Tarkan came down the steps.

"Steve," said the man, "what are you, democrat or republican?"

HIGH BENTON

"I guess I'm nothing, sir—not yet."

Mr. Tarkan laughed. "A sensible answer, my boy. Time enough for taking sides when you're a bit older."

Steve felt that Mr. Tarkan was pleased with his answer. He became all puffed up. But when the man's footsteps had died away down the road his pride was quickly squelched.

"Steve," his father said dryly, "you shirked on your job. Suppose you spray that last bush."

It was dark now, and Steve had to work without even the satisfaction of knowing how his labor fared. When he came into the house at last, pouting a bit, his mother sat sewing in the living-room, and his father was reading a newspaper. A plate of cookies stood on a table.

"Have some, Steve," said Mr. Benton. The incident of the rosebush was closed.

Steve munched a cake. Presently he heard his father chuckle as he read. That seemed to be a good omen. He resolved to make the plunge.

"Dad, you know Freckles Smith?"

"I've seen him around. Failed in his examinations, didn't he?"

"Y—yes. He got a job to-day."

"That's good. What doing?"

"Acting." Steve watched narrowly, but his father did not seem startled. "With the Triumph

TOO MANY FISH

Film Company." Still no sensation. "*He's going to get fifteen dollars a week.*"

"That's a good salary—for a boy like Smith," Mr. Benton said.

Steve had a sudden suspicion that all was not well. The conversation was not steering into the proper channel by any means.

"It—it isn't every boy who's lucky enough to get a chance like that, dad."

This time there was no question but that Mr. Benton's interest was caught. He folded his newspaper and laid it across his knees.

"Just what are you doing, Steve?" he asked curiously. "Preparing to let me know that you'd like to have a try at becoming a moving picture actor?"

Steve's mouth grew dry. "Well, dad, fifteen dollars a week to start——"

"Not for *fifty* dollars a week to start," said his father.

Steve had rather expected some such answer, and yet disappointment stung him sharply. Freckles Smith and Gabby Watson would taste of fame and glory, but his portion would be to live tamely on here in Waterford where nothing ever happened. Probably Gabby would come around ever so often with his pockets full of money and talk loudly of his adventures. That would be just like Gabby. And he would have to stand around and listen enviously.

HIGH BENTON

He had lost all interest in the cookies. His face was long and glum.

"Steve," said Mr. Benton, "there's only one type of worth-while success and that's the kind that comes from hard work. The Smith boy has never acted. These people simply want him for a purpose. He may serve that purpose for a month or two, and then they'll be through with him. They're not paying him for any ability he has. I want to see you forge ahead on merit. First education; then work; then the reward of work. That's your programme."

Steve was silent. It was easy enough for fathers to talk!

"When had you planned to go to this motion picture studio?" Mr. Benton asked.

"To-morrow."

"Was that Gabby boy in this thing with you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Humph!"

Steve had the feeling that it might have been better had he been in the adventure alone. By and by he said a half-hearted good-night and went upstairs. As he undressed a whistle sounded from the road—one blast long and two short. It was probably Gabby trying to lure him from the house. He turned out the light and went to bed.

"Steve!" his mother called; "it looks like rain. You had better close your window."

TOO MANY FISH

"I hope it pours," Steve muttered. That would give him an excuse for not making the morrow's journey.

But morning brought a cloudless sky, and a soft summer breeze that filled the dining-room with the fresh smell of the garden. While dressing Steve decided to sulk. There was just a chance that his father might relent. Then his nostrils caught the smell of hot biscuits, and bacon, and coffee. He sniffed thoughtfully. In order to sulk effectively it would be necessary for him to slight his breakfast. Perhaps—perhaps it would be better to sulk some other morning when he was not so hungry.

The table was not quite ready when he came downstairs. He took a pan of bread and milk out to Tramp. While he stood watching the dog, his father came from the direction of the Hiding House.

"That's a fine oar, Steve. When are you going to try it out?"

The boy's eyes glowed. "To-day, I guess."

"Um!" Mr. Benton pursed his lips. "Well, now, Steve, a platter of crisp, browned fish to-night——"

"I guess I could get a mess," the boy laughed.

Last night's disappointment was forgotten. After breakfast he hurried through his chores. Then, with sandwiches in the pockets of an old loose coat, with Tramp at his heels, and with the

HIGH BENTON

oar over his shoulder, he set out jauntily for Snake river. It was true, as his father had said—the piece of white ash had been modeled into a fine oar. Wait until he felt the pull of it against the tide! He turned a corner—and there was Gabby Watson coming toward him, the center of a group of boys.

Solomon in all his glory could not possibly have looked as Gabby looked then. His tan shoes were polished to a faultless brilliancy, but he had forgotten that there was a hole in one stocking. Somehow, his gray suit seemed to bunch on his body as though he found it uncomfortable and had been wriggling in it ever since he put it on. His face was scrubbed, his hair was plastered down, and a high starched collar chafed his neck and made him hold his head high. He was sweating; and the flaming red four-in-hand tie that hung from his collar made him seem even warmer than he really was.

At sight of Steve he stopped short. His eyes traveled in astonishment from the bulging pockets of the old coat up to the tip of the oar.

“Gee whiz! Are you going over to ask for a job looking like that?”

“I’m not going,” Steve said faintly. The crowd of boys, silent and breathless, had circled out, and he was now a co-tenant of the center.

TOO MANY FISH

"You're not?" Gabby spread his legs wide apart.
"Why not?"

"My father won't let me."

"Oh, you gilly! Why did you ask your father? I waited until my father was out of the house and then I asked my mother."

"What did she say, Gabby?" one of the circle of boys asked.

"She said 'No.' " Gabby mopped his face. "But I kept plaguing her, and by and by she said, 'Go, and for goodness' sake give me a minute's peace.' Mothers are always like that."

Steve shook his head. His mother wasn't.

"You don't work it right," Gabby said confidently. "Anyway, some people don't know how to treat their children. My father knows a man who says that most people ought never to have children because they don't know how to use them. Say, do you want to go back and see what your mother says?"

Steve knew it would be useless.

"Gee whiz!" Gabby cried in disgust. "That's what I get for depending on a fellow like you. You can't never go any place and you can't never do anything. My mother says some people bring up their children as though they were precious china."

"Are *you* going to back out, Gabby?" asked one of the admiring circle.

HIGH BENTON

"Miss a chance like that? I guess not. Maybe they'll put me in a picture right away. I wouldn't be surprised if they did."

Steve's heart was heavy. Ahead of Gabby lay the fair road of adventure. Gabby's quest of the Triumph Film Company's studio had all the allurements of the unknown—a visit to strange places, a talk with strange men, and a glimpse at strange scenes. Steve hitched the oar higher on his shoulder. Five minutes ago he had been eager for the feel of that same oar in the water. Now his anticipation was as dead as the ashes of the fires that had roared up the wide chimney of the Hiding House.

"Well, so long," he said.

"So long," Gabby answered. "Sorry you can't come. Maybe I'll be able to get you a pass when my picture comes to the Arcade. Maybe I'll be able to get free passes for all you fellows."

That seemed to cheer the gathering immensely. Steve walked away and did not once look back. All the sunshine was gone from his day. Gabby would have his picture in store windows and on signboards. What would he have? Nothing, just because he had to go to school. At that moment he would have taken an exceeding joy if somebody had told him that the Waterford high school had taken fire.

"Say, Steve, going on the river?"

TOO MANY FISH

One of the smaller town boys had followed him. Steve nodded glumly.

"Gregor Helsing's out in Mr. Lane's motor boat, Steve. Gregor went to work for Mr. Todd yesterday, and Mr. Lane came to Mr. Todd to fix something in the engine and Mr. Todd sent Gregor."

"Well?"

"You—you'll probably meet him if you go out on the river."

"Well, what of it?" Steve demanded fiercely. Was he never going to hear the end of that fight? The boy went back to the crowd he had left.

Steve shifted the oar to the other shoulder. Presently the heart of the town was left behind and the houses became straggling. He left the road, struck northward through some vacant land, and began to climb Little Hill. Reaching the top he sat on a rock and fanned his face with his cap.

The hill—it was really little more than a sharp slope that fell quickly on the other side—protected Waterford from the whistling northwest winds of winter. On its eastern side nestled the town itself. On the west side was the Tarkan-Boylert plant, some smaller shops and factories and several squares of cottages. This eastern district was called Smoky Hollow, and here the factory men lived and worked. It was the poorer section of Waterford. It was where Gregor Helsing lived.

From where he sat Steve had the land on either

HIGH BENTON

side under his eyes. Waterford was a bright, pleasant town. The houses were mostly white and green, or white and red, and were mostly set among trees on small plots. Here and there was a white-washed fence as a welcome variety to privet hedge. At the southern end steel threads glistening in the sun proclaimed the railroad right of way. His eyes lost the threads as they approached the hill and picked them out again as they emerged on the other side and ran parallel with the busy factory sidings. Half a mile to the west there was another glint of steel—the trolley tracks on the county road.

Below him on the other side of the hill Snake river twisted its way as though in torture. The banks were lush with marsh reeds, and birds took flight from the thicket in startled coveys. Now and then, if one kept watch on the stream, he might see a fish break water in a foaming, vivid flash.

But Steve did not watch the water. His thoughts were heavy with gloom. By and by Tramp's moist nose touched his fingers. One hand found the dog's head, patted it and stayed there. Tramp stood motionless, one ear cocked and one ear limp, as though Steve's troubles had become his own.

How long the boy sat there he did not know. A faint sound aroused him. It came from the west. A whining trolley car, followed by a rising trail of dust, ran along the county road. The car stopped as though to take on a passenger, and after an

TOO MANY FISH

interval started again. Steve sighed. Gabby Watson was on the way to his triumphs.

"Well, Tramp, we might as well move."

The dog's stumpy tail made a brave effort to wag.

Down the hill Steve went to the edge of the marsh reeds. As one sure of his way he followed a faint trail out to the water's edge. There, securely anchored in an inlet, was a roomy flat-bottomed skiff. Steve stepped aboard.

"Come on, Tramp."

The dog bounded after him.

One weather-stained oar was tied to the middle seat. Steve put it overboard. Gently he ran the new oar into the water. Paddling now right, now left, he wormed his way out through the inlet to the broad bosom of the river. A smooth swell moved the boat steadily. Steve lay on to the oars and put his weight and his muscle into long, swinging strokes.

The new oar was a beauty. It balanced to the ounce with its mate. But Steve felt no throbbing joy of achievement. It might have been a purchased oar for all the thrill he felt as the skiff dipped its nose and the foaming water rushed past. His mind was with Gabby.

Pushing steadily west he rounded two bends and approached the trolley bridge over the river. When the boat came abreast, he threw a rope around a

HIGH BENTON

pile and anchored. Here was where he was to catch his bait.

From a locker under the stern seat he took his tools. First two linen lines with hooks and sinkers attached. Next a small wooden frame covered with fine wire. Lastly a scalp net of cheesecloth. Leaning over the boat's side he lowered the net and pushed it, deep in the water, toward a bridge pile that was green and slimy with barnacles. For a moment he waited for the rippling water to quiet; then, suddenly, he brought the net up and held it dripping.

As the water ran out, gray, jellyish-looking creatures flopped inside the net. They were shrimps. Steve dumped them into the wire-covered box. Five times he repeated the operation. One of the shrimps had fallen into the bottom of the boat and Tramp smelled it gravely. Finally, he let it alone, and sat with head cocked critically as Steve rowed farther up the stream.

At Fiddler's Elbow, the sharpest bend along the river, the water began to run brackish. Here Steve dropped anchor and threw over his lines. Splashing musically the hooks and sinkers disappeared. After they had firmly found the bottom he took in slack and sat with a line in each hand. By this time, he thought, Gabby was probably at the studio. His shoulders drooped.

Suddenly one of the lines jerked twice. Through

TOO MANY FISH

instinct Steve's wrist responded. For one tense moment he waited. Something alive struggled and fought furiously down there in the depths. He began to haul in hand over hand.

Tramp broke into a volley of barks as a catfish came out of the water. But he gave it a wide berth as it lay in the bottom of the boat. He knew from experience that the fins of a catfish can do sad damage to a dog's tender nose.

After that the fish bit steadily. Ever so often Steve hauled in a fish, unhooked it, lifted the bait box from the water, placed shrimps on the hooks and threw out again. It was all done absent-mindedly and with very little heart.

"I wonder," he muttered, "if Gabby will get more than fifteen dollars."

By and by he emptied his pockets and shared his sandwiches with the dog. The tide was long past the flood, and all at once the fish stopped biting.

"Might as well see how many I have," Steve thought.

The count showed thirty-six fish in the boat. The boy gave a surprised whistle. He had not meant to take that many. Now that he had them what could he do with them? There was no use of taking three dozen fish home. He spread his lines to dry and prepared to clean his catch.

From the locker came a pair of scissors and a knife. One by one he skinned the fish until he was

sure he had all his mother would care to cook or to distribute among the neighbors. There were still a dozen he had not touched. After a moment he strung the cleaned fish and dumped the others overboard.

At that moment he heard the muffled putt-putt-putt-putt of a motor boat. Over his shoulder he saw it coming, Mr. Lane forward at the wheel and Gregor Helsing astern with the engine. He hoped it would pass. Mr. Lane called something and the engine stopped. The boat came toward him in a wide curve, cutting the water gracefully and losing speed.

"Hello, Stephen!" Mr. Lane called. The day's outing seemed to have brought a flash of color into his pale, sunken cheeks. "What luck?"

"Hello, Steve!" Gregor shouted.

Steve gave the other boy a cold eye. For the principal's information he held up his string a bit proudly.

"Gosh!" said Gregor. "They were surely biting." The motor boat was almost alongside. "How long were you here?"

Under the warmth of praise Steve began to thaw. "Oh, about three hours."

"Catch anything else—eels or perch?"

"No."

"A fine catch," said Mr. Lane. For a man so thin and drawn, his voice was remarkably strong

TOO MANY FISH

and deep. "You'll have to come out with me some day and show me how you do it. Perhaps some afternoon next we——"

His voice stopped abruptly in the middle of the word. He was looking hard toward the left. Startled, Steve looked that way, too. Floating out from behind his skiff on the tide were the dozen dead fish he had discarded, white bellies up.

Steve knew the sportsman's code, and the sportsman's dislike of a game hog. It seemed an hour before he could pluck up courage to glance toward the other boat. Mr. Lane was regarding him sternly, and yet, too, with sad disappointment.

"It's a pity, Stephen," the principal said at last, "that you did not know when you had enough. I thought better of you than that. All right, Gregor."

Gregor cranked, and the engine began its putt-putt-putt. Mr. Lane turned the wheel, and the motor boat veered off as it gained headway. Soon it was dwindling in size as it raced down Snake river toward the next bend.

The last thing Steve saw was Gregor standing up in the stern and looking back at him.

CHAPTER III

THE JITNEY MAN

BY the time Steve got back to his own inlet, the motor boat was not in sight on the river. For a moment he was tempted to throw the fish overboard; but in the end he carried them ashore with a very poor grace.

He was grievously sore in spirit. Through no fault of his, he reasoned bitterly, he had been placed in a sorry light. If his father had allowed him to follow his bent that day he would not have gone fishing. If he had not gone fishing he would not have caught too many fish. If he had not caught too many fish Mr. Lane would not have suspected him of slaughtering game out of pure wantonness.

There was no way he could explain. What would the principal think of him if he said that he was in a blue funk because his father had ruled that he should go to high school instead of winning fame in a moving picture studio. Placed in this light his ambition seemed to lose some of its charm.

At the moment Mr. Lane's opinion troubled him more than anything else. For more than a year

THE JITNEY MAN

now his ears had been full of the whisperings caused by those unexplained, solitary walks at unearthly hours. His boyish imagination had drawn a picture of a terrible man whose veins flowed ice, whose soul was dreary, and whose temper was one not to be lightly tried. As a grammar school pupil he had been in secret awe of the man. Now, faced with the prospect of coming under Mr. Lane's control in high school, his apprehensions were doubled. That day's affair had served to heighten his disquietude.

And all because he had been forbidden to look for work.

On the way home he met a town boy. The boy seemed impressed with the string of fish, but Steve refused to pause and discuss the catch.

"Say," said the boy, "Gabby isn't back yet."

Steve pretended vast indifference.

"I bet he landed the job."

Steve hurried his footsteps. At home his mother greeted him in a shocked tone:

"Steve! What am I going to do with twenty-four fish? You shouldn't have taken that many."

Steve's face went red. His mother took some of the fish next door, and while she was gone he cut bread and spread it with jam. Out in the Hiding House he ate moodily, staring all the while at the bullet holes above the window. To-day they seemed to match perfectly his own dark mood.

By and by he brushed away the crumbs and walked briskly down the old abandoned wagon-road. Soon he was on the street leading to the Waterford railroad station. His steps became slower as though he was in sight of his destination; and by that sign any Waterford boy would have known that he was on his way to the Jitney Man's.

The place stood two blocks from the station, and Elias Todd, the Jitney Man, was apparently asleep in a chair tilted on two legs against a one-story frame building. The boards looked as though they were recovering from sunburn for the red paint was peeling off in blistered strips. For more than a year now Mr. Todd had been talking about applying a fresh coat. For more than a year, too, the paint had lain in the shop in unopened cans. But Mr. Todd never seemed to get to it. Sometimes it was the weather, but more often it was his heart. It was astonishing how weak a heart such an apparently healthy man could have.

Anybody, looking at him, would have suspected at once that the shop inside was in confusion with bolts, and nuts, and tools, and odds and ends of small machine parts carelessly and hopelessly mixed. According to the greasy business cards that now and then came to light, he did repairing in all its branches and ran a jitney automobile service on the side. But Waterford had come to know through bitter experience that Elias Todd's jitney

THE JITNEY MAN

service was to be taken with reservations. His solitary automobile was six or seven years old, and was always more or less troubled with a chronic cough, or rattle, or crack. More than once it had broken down in the rain while bringing commuters home from the railroad station, and the commuters had had to get out and walk.

"It's old 'Lias's heart," Mr. Todd had remarked apologetically on these occasions. "Was goin' to fix this machine yesterday but a spell came on."

What the commuters said about his heart as they squashed homeward through the rain would not look well in print.

He was a little old man, with a long neck rising out of a red shirt that he never seemed to change. There was a wart on his Adam's apple, and every time he swallowed the wart jumped up and down nervously as though protesting against so much activity. His head was shining and bald, and the scraggly beard that covered his face was faded and coarse. All day long, even when he dozed in his tilted chair, his jaws kept working steadily; and down his chin, on the right side, there was always a moist smear of tobacco juice. Some people said it was less trouble for him to let the juice run down than to spit it out. They said other things about him, too, and none of them were complimentary.

He opened his eyes as footsteps drew near. "'Lo," he said feebly.

"Hello, Mr. Todd," said Steve.

"Feelin' poorly again, Stevie. Old 'Lias's heart won't be a' lastin' much longer. Where was you, Stevie; fishin'?"

Steve nodded. Inside the shop he caught a glimpse of Gregor Helsing busily employed. He did not want to discuss fish.

"It's well for them that has strong hearts," Mr. Todd sighed, "and can enjoy life. I ain't a-complainin', Stevie. Folks don't understand old 'Lias."

The boy's quick sympathy was touched. "Anything—anything I can do for you, Mr. Todd?"

"No Stevie. You're a good boy. Lots wouldn't care what happened to old 'Lias. There's that there high-toned Mr. Tarkan now. Left a wringer to be fixed last week, and came down to-day a-raisin' ructions 'cause I forgot to write for a repair part. Took the wringer away and said I was a good-for-nothin'. 'Tain't right, Stevie."

Gregor came out of the shop. Steve's scowl seemed to abash him not at all.

"I'm through with that job, Mr. Todd. Anything else?"

"Can't think o' anything now, Greggie. Maybe I'll think o' something to-morrow when I feel better. Old 'Lias's heart is a-havin' a bad spell."

Gregor stuck his tongue in his cheek and winked openly at Steve. "How about the jitney? She's still got that rattle in her engine."

THE JITNEY MAN

"Not to-day, Greggie."

"Well, I'll wash her anyway. She's caked with mud from last week's storm. Where's the hose?"

"I'll have to look for it, and I ain't feelin' right. Little dirt don't matter. Look at all the dirt there is, Greggie—fields, roads, mountains, valleys. You listen to old 'Lias; the Lord must have meant folks to have a little dirt 'cause see how much He made."

"There's more water in the world than earth," said Gregor. "The water's there to wash dirt."

For a man with a weak heart Mr. Todd spoke up quite spryly, "How do you know that, Greggie? Did you ever see more water?"

"No; but the geographies——"

"Tush! You listen to old 'Lias, Greggie; there's a powerful lot o' lies in books. If there's so much water why can't we see it? Answer me that, now. And how could they measure water? You can take a hundred-foot tape and measure land, but how can you measure water? You can't scratch a mark on water when you move the tape. 'Tain't right to fill boys' heads with nonsense from books. They tried to spile me with schoolin', but when they thought I was payin' attention to their lies I was a-holdin' up a book and learnin' to chew tobacco. Old 'Lias was too smart for them."

Gregor laughed and winked at Steve again, and went his way. Mr. Todd continued to grumble.

"More water! Tush! Where is it? Education!

There was old 'Lias lettin' it go in one ear and out the other, and there was Aaron a-botherin' 'bout books all the time. And who's the better for it to-day? Where's old 'Lias's brother Aaron? A failure on life's sea. Haven't set eyes on him in years and don't want to. Wrote me a letter. Said he was a-coming to see me. Always was a-bother' me 'bout books and things when we was boys. So what did old 'Lias do? Wrote and said I ain't sent for him. That's what comes of all his book learnin', Stevie."

Steve heard only a part of it. Of course, Mr. Todd was wrong about the water, and the story of brother Aaron had been told many times before. He could still see Gregor through the trees, swinging along and whistling without a care in the world.

"Stevie," Mr. Todd said suddenly, "what's a-botherin' you?"

Out came the story of the fishing trip on Snake river. Every Waterford boy felt he could tell Mr. Todd his troubles. The news seemed to rally the old man considerably. His eyes sparkled. The chair came down with a bang on all four legs.

"I hope you gave that professor a piece o' your mind, Stevie?"

The boy shook his head.

"Should have. There's teachers for you, brow-beating a boy 'cause they have the authority. They tried to stuff their nonsense into old 'Lias, but I

THE JITNEY MAN

was too smart for them. Oh, yes! I played hookey, and none the worse for it. You don't want to pay too much attention to teachers. You hear me."

Steve heard every word of it.

"They'll spile you. Yes, sir! Awful lot of men have had their lives spiled by teachers. You put one of these here professors up to a real man and he don't amount to shucks, but he'll scare a boy half to death. I'd just like to put my tongue on this Mr. Lane."

To Steve this sympathy was sweet. And it had, he thought, a basis of fact. Teachers did lord it over boys. If Mr. Todd ever did open up on Mr. Lane he hoped fervently that he would be around to see the fun.

"Now you take those fish, Stevie. What's fish for? To catch. How many fish are there in Snake river? You just say to one of those smart teachers that old 'Lias wants to know. Fifteen or twenty dead fish and what's the difference? Nobody knows. Don't you let no smart-Aleck teachers put on you. Any time they talk just ask how they know. That'll catch them, Stevie. You'll hear old 'Lias ask them some day."

The perilous logic of this slovenly old pirate soothed the hurt in Steve's breast. For the moment he didn't care a hang what Mr. Lane might think. He started for home blissfully at ease, and at the next corner found a noisy group of boys approach-

ing from a cross street. A second look showed Gabby Watson among them.

It was apparent that this was not the worshipful gathering that had seen Gabby on his way that morning. Instead of holding his head arrogantly high, Gabby seemed to be in acute distress. The boys were laughing and shouting—yes, and jeering.

“He was going to give us all free passes to the Waterford Arcade.”

“And his picture would be in all the store windows. Ha, ha.”

“I bet they didn’t have enough money to hire him.”

Gabby looked as though it would have been a pleasure to annihilate his tormentors. However, there was still the necessity of saving his face. There was still the matter of an alibi to be attended to. He threw back his shoulders.

“You fellows think you’re funny, don’t you? I could have gone to work for them right away. What do you know about that? Those moving picture people know a real actor when they see one.”

The shouting stopped.

“Why didn’t you go?” a voice asked curiously.

“Because they wanted to—to—to send me out west. They said they only needed one boy actor here, and they already had Freckles Smith, and they said had they known about me Freckles wouldn’t

THE JITNEY MAN

have got the job. But they got to pay him now because he has a contract. Then they wanted to send me to the other studio."

The crowd was silent, weighing the evidence suspiciously.

"How much would they pay you, Gabby?"

"Oh, twenty dollars," Gabby said indifferently.

"Gosh! Why didn't you take it?"

"My mother wouldn't let me go so far away."

"How far was it?"

"Oh, away down south——"

"You said out west last time."

A gleeful shout broke from the boys. Their victim was trapped. Steve drew away and left Gabby to make what explanations were possible.

"Gabby didn't get that moving picture job," he told his father that night.

"I imagined as much," Mr. Benton said dryly. "Did you think he would?"

"I—yes, sir." Steve went out-of-doors and sat on the porch steps. Tramp came out of the darkness and sat beside him. It was queer, he thought, the way things worked out. Tramp didn't like Gabby, and his father didn't like Gabby, and now here he was glad that he had not gone to the Triumph Film Company's studio.

CHAPTER IV

THE IVY CLUB

ON a certain September day Steve said good-bye to knickerbockers for all time and donned his first long trousers. A week later, on a morning gray and dismal with threatening rain, he entered high school.

His summer vacation had been one of dreamy inactivity. After that short-lived itch for moving picture fame, the ambition to do something in the world troubled him no more. He hoed the garden by fits and starts. He cut the grass once a week because on that point his father's law was iron-clad. Sometimes he spent a morning on the river; sometimes he played baseball on the field near the town end; sometimes he roamed the woods to the west of the county road with Tramp. But for the most part, with sundry other boys of Waterford, he loafed away his days in Elias Todd's musty shop.

He was always sure of finding a small but choice crew at Mr. Todd's—Gabby Watson, and Hub Morgan, and Hank Davis and Andy Smith. They made free and easy in the shop, helping on a job

THE IVY CLUB

when the humor seized them, quitting when they had had enough, and listening at all times with rapt attention to Mr. Todd's wondrous tales of what a wild lad he had been in his day and what a thorny path he had fashioned for his teachers. "And me none the worse for it," Mr. Todd always ended; "not a mite the worse."

Occasionally they cooked something on the sloppy gas-stove in the rear, and ate it and thought it good. It was a queer thing, that stove, with three iron legs and a brick under the fourth corner. There was always a pile of dirty dishes flanking the sides. Mr. Todd's philosophy was to use clean crockery until there was no more. Then, if boys appeared, he would be suddenly affected with a heart attack and they would wash the pile. If no boys came that day Mr. Todd would wash the pile himself.

In this atmosphere Gregor Helsing moved, apparently the only industrious person within the four walls. He alone didn't seem to tarnish through association with the place. The floor got more brooming that summer than in all its previous history. When the others tired of a job, he finished it cheerfully. Once he laboriously sorted all the nuts, bolts, screws and springs, and put them in separate boxes according to sizes, and marked the boxes.

"Now, Greggie," Mr. Todd complained, "you're

fixin' up to spile my shop. What did the good Lord give people eyesight for? When old 'Lias wants a two-inch bolt he knows one without having it put in a box with its name and address."

Gabby Watson giggled. The visiting boys, with the possible exception of Steve, found something highly antagonistic in Gregor; and even Steve was unfriendly. That afternoon Gabby began to pitch bolts and nuts at a crack, helping himself carelessly from the various boxes. Gregor returned while he was at his sport.

"I separated all those," Gregor said slowly.

Gabby grinned, and tossed a bolt that stopped flush on the crack. The next moment Gregor had him by the jacket and ran him, sputtering and squirming toward the door.

"Hey, Mr. Todd," Gabby called.

"Let my work alone," Gregor warned.

Mr. Todd had been peacefully sunning himself outside. His chair came down with a crash as Gabby staggered past him.

"Here, now, Greggie," the old man cried in a panic, "no fightin', no fightin'. You know old 'Lias has a weak heart."

"Tell him not to interfere with my work," Gregor answered calmly, and walked inside. For three or four days Gabby gave him a wide berth, spending his time in the doorway muttering and growling under his breath.

THE IVY CLUB

Steve had seen the whole row. After it was over he walked home. He didn't exactly like Gregor, but—— Later, when Gabby appealed to him for sympathy, he was stubbornly silent.

"You're a fine friend," Gabby sneered. "My mother says you can't trust anybody these days."

Then came the day when Steve put on long trousers for the first time. The night before he went to bed as a boy. He got up that morning still a boy. And then all at once he seemed to grow years older. Certainly he felt inches taller. The long creases down the trouser legs fascinated him. The deep side pockets were wonderful, and he at once adopted his father's trick of running his hands into his pockets and teetering up on his toes. He even had a thought of shaving; but, though he searched his face in front of the bath-room mirror, he could find no sign of outstanding hair on lip or chin. He was disappointed.

"Feel like a man now?" his mother asked with a smile when he came downstairs.

"Well——" Steve raised on his toes importantly; and his father, in the act of swallowing a mouthful of coffee, was suddenly seized with a fit of coughing and choking.

"The main thing, Steve," he said when he recovered his breath, "is to act like one."

Steve got a look at himself in the sideboard mirror as he took his place. Of course he'd act like

HIGH BENTON

a man. And then he stared hard. In that light he thought he saw a distinctly dark mark on his chin that might be hair. Was there something wrong with that bath-room mirror?

"Steve," said his mother, "what in the world have you been doing to your face? You have a smudge."

"Where?"

"On your chin."

The boy's hopes were crushed. But this was too wonderful a day for him to be long cast down. Heretofore his mother had sugared his coffee before she passed it to him, and he had never dictated as to the amount. Now he said, "Two lumps, please." His father always took two lumps. Mr. Benton choked again.

Afterwards Steve strolled down to Mr. Todd's. He had fifteen cents in his pocket, and all at once he remembered that his father had a habit of jingling coins. He tried the trick, but a dime and a nickel made very little sound. He stopped at a store and had his money changed into pennies. Fifteen coppers answered famously, and he went down the street sounding like a walking bank.

Small boys of the town hooted "long legs, long legs," after him, but he was serenely undisturbed. And as he walked into the Jitney Man's, Gregor Helsing gave him a good-natured grin that he pretended not to see.

THE IVY CLUB

"Yah!" cried Gabby. "Wearing his father's cut-me-downs."

"They're new," Steve said coldly. A moment later he caught Gabby studying him enviously.

Mr. Todd was helping Gregor clean a car that had been left the day before. His faded whiskers moved with irregular motions as he chewed his everlasting quid of tobacco.

"Feel like what you was a man now, Stevie?" he asked genially.

Gabby gave a shout of derision. "Look who thinks he's a man."

Mr. Todd eased his labors and sat on the running board of the automobile. "I guess you can finish her up yourself, Greggie," he said. "Speakin' o' pants now, used to be that long pants meant some-thin', but times has changed. Long pants meant a body was earnin' his salt. Now what? Like as not a body with long pants will be settin' in a schoolroom wastin' his time. 'Taint right, Stevie, to waste time. It's wicked."

Gregor went on polishing the body of the car, but a broad smile crept across his face at the thought of Elias Todd talking about wasted time.

"When a body can read and write and figger," the man went on, "he's educated, Stevie, and you listen to Old 'Lias who says so. What kind o' lessons will they be a-givin' you at this here high school?"

HIGH BENTON

Steve wasn't sure. He glanced at Gregor who had already completed one year of high school work.

"In the business course," Gregor said, "you get commercial geography, world history, English, algebra, and elementary general science."

Mr. Todd snorted. "Science! Suppose you go clerkin' in the Beehive store, Stevie, and a woman comes in and wants to buy her a yard o' silk. Do you figger to tell her how old was this here silk bug, and where he lived, and——"

"Silk *worm*, Mr. Todd," said Gregor.

"Worms and bugs is all insects," Mr. Todd said severely. "Suppose I set down to-morrow and write me a science book about the moon being white 'cause it's made o' slack lime. Who's to say wrong? You tell old 'Lias that, Stevie? Who's been there?"

Steve didn't know of anybody who had been there; but he did know that in this one instance the old man's argument was foolish.

"You know why they build high schools?" Mr. Todd demanded. "It's just to make jobs for teachers. Fraud, that's what it is; fraud against the taxpayers. You wouldn't ketch no son o' mine in high school. Aaron Todd wouldn't have been no worthless body beggin' lodgin's o' his brother if it wasn't for the time he wasted in high school."

THE IVY CLUB

Just then Mr. Benton came up from the station, and Steve joined him.

“ ‘Evenin’, Mr. Benton,” the Jitney Man said genially.

“Good-evening,” Mr. Benton said shortly. Steve looked at his father in surprise. A sudden thought startled him. Was his father one of the men who spoke harshly of Mr. Todd?

As the days passed the wonder of the long trousers wore off, but he continued to think himself very much a man. Even Tramp grew used to the new garment and ceased to smell it suspiciously. Little by little the sharp crease faded. Next the hour came when Steve sat in a chair at the jitney shop without first brushing the seat.

“Well now, Stevie,” said Mr. Todd, “you’re actin’ like folks again. ’Tain’t right for a body to be fussy ’bout where he sets, and what he rests against. ’Tain’t right.”

Steve reflected that it certainly was a bother when you had to be careful all the time. That afternoon, for the first time in weeks, he assisted in cooking a beef stew on the gas stove. Later, while he ate some from a cracked, chipped plate, he wondered why beef stew never tasted as good as this at home.

“Steve,” said his mother that night, “you have those trousers stained. Go right upstairs and clear them.”

Steve went upstairs not much impressed with the rebuke. To-morrow Mr. Todd had said they would try their hands at making a real New England chowder. Anyway, clothes were bound to get stained sometime.

"You must keep that suit in shape for school," Mrs. Benton called up the stairs.

School! Steve made a wry face. Mr. Todd was more than half right at that.

Nevertheless, when the morning of the first session came, he left the house with a lively sense of anticipation. On the way he met the members of his own particular "gang"—Hub Morgan, limping in new shoes; Hank Davis, excited over the prospect of a school football team, and Gabby, sheepishly aware that *his* first long trousers would be recognized as unmistakably cut-me-downs. Steve could not restrain a wise grin.

"They were made over by a tailor," Gabby said with a flash of spirit. "They're real tailor-made."

"I guess these shoes are, too," Hub Morgan complained. "I'll bet no shoemaker ever made them."

"My mother," Gabby announced, "says you always get cheated at the Beehive store." At any other time his trousers would have been made the occasion for noisy banter, but this morning there were interests afoot too new to be lightly abandoned.

They began to overtake large and small groups

THE IVY CLUB

of boys all walking toward the high school. The boys fresh from grammar school all seemed keen for this new experience; the older boys were calm, untroubled and unhurried. Secretly Steve envied them their poise and their superior knowledge of what high school life was like.

Presently his group came in sight of the school. It was a low, two-storied building rambling off into an L, with a red brick foundation and with faded gray clapboards above the brick. Except that there were six wide, fan-shaped stone steps in front, and wide, battered, double doors at the top, and solid rows of long windows on each floor, the structure would have looked like the home of some very large family. Certainly it had none of the stateliness and severity of the average high school.

The road in front was of rolled dirt. Across the street were small houses, each with its flower-sprinkled yard. Sometimes, when the hard rains came, the road would flood and the water would back up as far as the stone steps; and then the janitor would lay planks from the third step out to an angle of dry grounds. Those planks, kept in the cellar, were an essential part of the school equipment.

High above the entrance was a cupola that housed the none too extensive laboratory. Once up there, a boy had concocted an explosion that had singed his hair, smashed two windows, and thrown Miss

Jennie Cooper's advanced English class into a panic. Since then the cupola had been a place to which each physics and chemistry class climbed, on occasion, with high anticipation. But, though the explosion had never been repeated, Miss Cooper had had her class-room removed to the farthest end of the first floor.

All this was common knowledge to Steve as it was to most Waterford boys. His companions went in to register, but for a moment he lingered out-of-doors. Already he could see a difference between the school he had left and the school to which he had come. The high school boys were not so noisy, and not so much given to pushing, and shoving, and pulling around. This, then, was a school pitched in something of the dignity of young manhood. He squared his shoulders and walked up the steps.

There was a wide, cool hall down the center of the building, with class-rooms on either side. The hall was like the town itself—homely and clean. The bottom half of the walls were paneled in some dark wood, and the upper half and the ceilings were painted a soft tan. The stairway leading upstairs was of that same dark wood; and under it, tucked in cosily, was the school's reference library. To the left as he came in the door, directly opposite the stairway, was the principal's office. There was a

THE IVY CLUB

moment when Steve wondered what Mr. Todd would have thought of it all.

The anteroom of the office was comfortably filled with boys examining cards to see to what extent their periods joined in the different courses. At the moment no students were in the principal's office itself.

"Get in," Gabby whispered hoarsely.

Steve went in. Not until he stood at the principal's square desk did he remember the incidents of their last meeting on the river.

"Good-morning, Stephen," said Mr. Lane, and smiled. The man's face was fresh, as though whatever it was that harassed him at times was for the present gone.

"Good-morning," said Steve. He drew a deep breath of relief. Evidently the principal did not intend to hold against him the number of fish he had caught.

Mr. Lane dipped a pen in ink. "Commercial course, I presume, Stephen?"

"Yes, sir."

The principal wrote for a moment, and then handed him a card. "I wish you success, my boy. If ever you find yourself facing problems that seem too deep, I hope you will come to me for advice."

"Thank you," said Steve. Even as he spoke there was a soft thud, and through the window he saw a football rising in the air. In falling it

banged against the ledge, and bounced off on an angle.

All at once a change seemed to come over the principal. He reached for his cane, arose, and limped to the windows that overlooked the dirt road. Quickly he pulled the shades. The room was now dark. Back at his desk again he snapped on an electric bulb. Steve saw that the deep lines and hollows were back in his face again.

When Steve came out to the anteroom, walking quietly, Gabby gave him a sharp look. "Gee whiz, what happened to you? You look as though something went wrong."

Steve tried to laugh it off. Gabby followed at his elbow. "Say, did he blow you up?"

"You're dreaming," Steve said shortly. To tell Gabby what he had seen would be to herald it all over the school. His card showed that the commercial course had its first period of the school year with Mr. Frost, who taught commercial geography and history. Gabby, Hub and Hank Davis trailed in his rear. Many boys were in the room ahead of them, and they took their pick of the desks that were not already claimed. A few minutes later the bell rang, and the school year was officially under way.

The assembly room was that part of the building formed by the L. It was tremendously high, Steve thought, as he marched in; and during the exercises

THE IVY CLUB

he spent the time craning his neck and staring all around instead of paying attention to Prof. Lane's words of greeting. Presently he found himself back in Mr. Frost's room.

The teacher was a tall man, thin and straight, with a voice that boomed up from his chest with astonishing force. "My name is Frost," he said smilingly, "but I'm not a bit frosty when you get to know me—not when you do your work."

The class laughed.

"I might just as well announce while I'm at it that I have one pet hate. I'm not keen for the young man who thinks to be a hero by starting something."

There was another laugh, but some of the boys looked serious.

"And now," said Mr. Frost, "let me get acquainted with you. As I call your name stand up and let me see what you look like. You can take a look at me at the same time. Adler."

Adler stood up. Steve's name was third on the list. Gabby's, in the W's, was last. He popped up, and immediately dropped back into his seat.

"I'm afraid you'll have to try it again, Watson," Mr. Frost said. "All I saw was a head rising and falling."

This time Gabby stood until told twice to sit down.

"I am afraid," Mr. Frost sighed, "we have met

our first young hero." He said it so drolly that Gabby, who had expected to start a laugh at the teacher's expense, found the class laughing at him.

The second session that morning was with Mr. Archer, teacher of algebra. He was a short man, immaculately dressed, with a habit of continually preening himself. The sign above his door read "Philip Archer," and the students whisperingly called him "Phyllis." It was in his room that two thirds of all school trouble started, for he seemed to have but little ability to command discipline. And yet, in some strange fashion, he managed to drive home his subject. Mr. Archer's class might be boisterous, but it learned algebra.

Walking home at noon, Steve's crowd discussed the morning's happenings. Gabby predicted some high times in Mr. Archer's room.

"I like Mr. Frost," said Steve. "He's right from the shoulder, but I bet he's square."

Gabby scowled. "My father says that a man who bullies boys is no good. Did you hear him rap us right at the start?"

"He wasn't rapping," said Steve. "He was laying down the law and putting a little humor in it."

"I put a little humor in it myself," said Gabby. "You didn't see him finishing *me*."

"Give him time," Hub Morgan said cheerfully. "Give him time, Gabby. You can't expect him to throw you out of school the first day."

THE IVY CLUB

There was a wheezy rattling of brakes, and an automobile rolled up to the curb and stopped. It was Mr. Todd in his aged and uncertain jitney, carrying a trunk up from the station. Instantly his keen eyes caught the expression of dissatisfaction on Gabby's face.

"Somebody been a-steppin' on your toes, Gabby?" he asked softly.

Gabby, sure of a sympathetic listener, was only too eager to tell of his experience with Mr. Frost.

"Didn't I tell you?" the old man cried. "Brow-beatin' a boy the first day. You listen to old 'Lias, Gabby; that man will everlastin'ly scald you. I wouldn't stand for it. I'd tell him so."

"Maybe I will," said Gabby.

Afterwards Hub Morgan remarked that Mr. Todd had some mighty queer ideas, but that he was right about some things. Steve said nothing. There were times when the Jitney Man's philosophy troubled him vaguely.

That afternoon he met two more of his teachers—Mr. Garfunkel, who propounded the elements of general science, and Miss Jennie Cooper, who taught English.

Mr. Garfunkel was a fat, absent-minded little man who wore enormously thick spectacles and who tilted his head back and closed his eyes whenever he addressed his class. But it wasn't safe to presume on those closed eyes as many a Waterford

boy had discovered to his sorrow. There was a tradition among the older students that Mr. Garfunkel had reduced to an exact science the art of smelling mischief in the making. Certain those eyes could pop open at the most inopportune moments.

Miss Cooper's subject was down in Waterford vocabulary as "P. T." Translated, this means "pretty tough." She had a habit of biting sarcasm, and many a class had known an hour of distress because of some prank.

The book that would be used in her room during the year was distributed. It was Stevenson's "Travels with a Donkey." There were several suppressed titters as the title was read. Then somebody guffawed loudly. The whole class broke into laughter.

"Who was responsible for that first outburst?" Miss Cooper demanded.

One of the boys stood up sheepishly.

"What is so funny?" Miss Cooper demanded.

"I didn't know people traveled with donkeys."

"You'd know it if you were a teacher," was the answer. The boy's cheeks grew red.

And so it came to pass that Gabby had another choice morsel to tell to Mr. Todd that afternoon at the jitney shop.

"You can't tell me nothin' about high schools," Mr. Todd said. "You all know old 'Lias warned

THE IVY CLUB

you. No son o' mine would waste his time studyin' about travels with a donkey. 'Tain't right. Nobody travels with donkeys nowadays. Boys should be taught about autermobiles and flyin' machines and such things."

"But this is English, Mr. Todd," Steve said. "We study style and——"

"Style!" The old man's voice was a shocked squeak. "Used to be that the preachers raised Ned about girls and style, and now they teaches it to boys. Great blisters! No wonder old 'Lias's brother became a poor no-account!"

Steve did not try to explain. On his way home he essayed the high pump in front of the Friendship Hose Company's firehouse and found that it was just as easy to jump wearing long trousers as it was wearing shorts. Tramp met him at the gate with a noisy welcome, and they rolled and tumbled about the lawn. Then they went out to the Hiding House and snooped around looking for adventures; and when they came back at dusk Mr. Benton was home and supper was ready.

"Well, Steve," said Mr. Benton, "how do you like high school?"

Steve answered in a matter-of-fact voice. "All right."

"Keep it that way. You're not plain Steve Benton now. You're a high school student—'High' Ben-

HIGH BENTON

ton. I want you to remember that word and think of what it means."

"What word?" Steve asked.

"The word high," said his father. For a while he looked thoughtful, and then he began to grin. He wondered what Mr. Todd would say to that.

Two days later football practice started at the school. There was nothing elaborate about the preparations. By word of mouth the news was passed from boy to boy. And that afternoon, down in that part of the basement under the assembly room, the students took possession of their lockers.

Waterford's schedule, year after year, called for the same five games. On days when Mr. Frost had time he came out and coached. Other days the team did the best it could alone. There was no standard uniform, and each player wore whatever he could gather. The result was a weird collection of jackets, moleskins and gorgeous-colored jerseys. On the field the team looked like a combination of misfits, but year after year it played a fairly good type of football.

The lockers were a recent acquisition. The students had built them of pine wood, and had thought the work great sport. At first there had been only enough for the team. Others had gradually been added until now there was one for every student. But the basement room had become too small for so much crowding, and four of the lockers had been

THE IVY CLUB

put by themselves in a passage that was none too bright. These four were known in the school as the "Waterford undesirables."

Steve had played some football, but he had never been rated above ordinary. Purely for what fun he might get out of the game he put down his name. The enrollment took place in the school library. Carpenter, the football captain, looked at him dubiously.

"I never knew you were a player, Steve."

"I'm not much," Steve said cheerfully; "I might as well turn out with the others."

Gabby was the next to sign the roll. "I've always played center," he said.

"I know," Carpenter sighed. "Grammar schools always pick some fellow for center just because he's fat. Well, we'll see."

Gabby retired rather crestfallen. Later he saw Gregor Helsing in earnest conversation with the captain.

"What's Gregor doing in this?" he asked a boy who stood nearby.

"He's the team manager," was the answer. "He books the games, and arranges about carfare and things like that. Gregor's got a great head for that sort of stuff."

Gabby sniffed.

That afternoon there was a rush for the lockers as soon as the last period ended. Steve's class had

had a hard time getting Stevenson properly started on his travels with a donkey, and its period was prolonged. Miss Cooper had grown impatient over their pronunciation of such words as *Le Monastir* and *Le Puy* from the first chapter, and Hub Morgan had come to ignoble grief trying to paraphrase the scene in which Stevenson describes his "contumelious" quarrel with the saddler. Hub had an idea the quarrel had been good-natured.

"What does contumelious mean?" Miss Cooper asked frigidly.

Hub didn't know. He hadn't bothered to look up the word. Miss Cooper picked a book from her desk.

"Mr. Morgan," she said, "this is a dictionary. Ordinarily a fourth grade grammar boy has learned to use this book, but I presume it is new to you. When you meet a new word, you turn to this book. If the word begins with an a, you look under the A section. Now, in order to discover the meaning of contumelious you turn to the C section—— Will somebody please lend Mr. Morgan a dictionary?"

"I have one," Hub muttered sullenly.

"Have you? How extraordinary! One would never suspect it from your description of that scene. Turn to the C's. Third letter—A. B. C."

Hub, his face, ears and neck a brick red, found the word and announced its meaning. The reading

THE IVY CLUB

of the chapter went on. Miss Cooper would not let the class go until the allotted day's work was done. It was a quarter past three before the period was closed.

The other classes had already gone to the basement. Steve, with Gabby at his heels, raced down the stairs. The day was misty and promised rain. Nevertheless, in spite of the bleakness of the out-of-doors, the basement was sweet with the clear smell of the country, and this smell was mixed with a salty tang from Snake river that spoke of high tide. Boys who were coming out for football were singing and dressing in front of open lockers. Boys who were not interested in the sport were stocking their lockers with odds and ends they might not use for months—canoe paddles, baseball gloves, ice skates, etc. Gabby saw a vacant locker and threw in his coat and hat.

"Here," cried a voice, "that's not yours."

Gabby turned. He saw Gregor Helsing standing a few feet away with a note-book in his hands. "Well, where is mine?"

"You've got locker 38. And Steve has——" Gregor consulted the book—"Steve's got locker 39."

Together they went down the room following the numbers on the doors. Suddenly they halted. Lockers 38 and 39 were in the poorly lighted pas-

sageway. They had been assigned to two of the "Waterford undesirables."

"Gregor put this up on us," Gabby cried hotly.

Steve was not so fast to pass judgment. He scratched one side of his nose as though it itched.

"Are you going to stand for this?" Gabby demanded. "Gee whiz! I'm not!" He went back and faced Gregor in the center of the basement, but he took care to see that he did not go too close.

"What's the trouble?" Gregor asked.

"Why did you give us the worst lockers?"

"I didn't give you anything. Locker 38 was the one you drew."

"I didn't draw anything," Gabby cried excitedly. "You know I didn't. You don't like me and you don't like Steve, and you're getting square. I'll see about this, and——"

"What's this talk about getting square?" Prof. Lane demanded from the head of the basement stairs.

All at once Gabby seemed to lose his voice. His bearing became furtive, just as it had the day he had sidled past Mr. Benton. He cast a quick glance at the principal limping down the stairs and holding fast to the banister. Then his eyes shifted.

"Watson thinks I had something to do with giving him one of the passageway lockers," Gregor explained.

"Perhaps Watson does not understand our sys-

THE IVY CLUB

tem." Prof. Lane studied the boy. "Because there are four lockers lacking in popularity the incoming class is assigned by lot. Numbers are placed in a hat and names in another hat. Gregor made the drawing yesterday in my office. Your name, Watson, drew locker 38."

"Are you satisfied?" Gregor demanded.

"I guess we are," Gabby hastened to say.

"We?" Prof. Lane's voice was a question.

"Steve and I," said Gabby.

Steve pretended to be very busy getting out of his coat. Gabby came back, and they took their lockers in silence. Presently they were out-of-doors. Carpenter and another boy were kicking a football back and forth in front of the school. Prof. Lane's shades were drawn again as though to shut out the sight; and though it was daylight, behind the shades Steve could see the office lights burning.

The squad went to the field at the village end. Mr. Frost sent word that he could not come, and for an hour the players caught punts, and fell on the ball, and passed. Steve had a joyous time. The fact that he missed most of his catches did not disturb him in the least. He liked to be with the crowd, and in the midst of the excitement. Every now and then he wiped the sweat from his eyes and grinned at Gabby; but Gabby's face was glum and sour.

Hub Morgan had walked out to watch the prac-

tice. When the work was over, he and Gabby and Steve came back through the quiet streets.

"I don't believe that yarn about drawing names and numbers," Gabby announced.

"You told Prof. Lane you did," said Steve.

"Gee whiz!" Gabby cried, "could I tell him anything else? My father says that when people close the doors to do something, they have something to hide. Funny it's the two fellows Gregor doesn't like who should get stung. Isn't it, now?"

"Well—yes," said Steve.

"Believe that fishy story?" Gabby demanded scornfully; "I guess not."

"Do you know what?" Hub cried suddenly. "I think the whole school has it in for us. Look at the way Miss Cooper gave it to me."

"Oh, Miss Cooper gives it to everybody," said Steve.

"She don't give it to them as bad as she gave it to me," Hub insisted stubbornly, as though an attempt had been made to steal some of his honors. "I wonder if Gregor has been telling things."

"Telling what?"

"Oh, things! You know how he was around the Jitney House, always carrying himself high."

"I bet he did tell," Gabby decided promptly. "I wouldn't put it past him. The trouble is you can't figure what's going to happen to us next. We ought to do something."

THE IVY CLUB

"What?" Hub asked.

"Well, organize. My father says that's how people always get their rights. Didn't the United States organize and get its liberty? We'll organize a club."

Hub was suspicious. "What kind of club?"

"A club just among ourselves to stand together against oppression." Gabby said it with an air of theatrical grandness. "Remember the poetry we had in grammar school:

' True friends like ivy and the wall,
Both stand together, or together fall.'

"That will be our motto. We'll call ourselves the Ivy Club. All right?"

Steve and Hub nodded. They had reached the high school. The side door leading directly to the basement was open. Gabby put out his hand.

"Let's shake on it," he said quickly.

Three right hands joined solemnly. Then Steve and Gabby went into the building. While he donned street attire, Steve wondered just how far he was committed. He didn't want to ask Gabby for fear the question might seem like weakness.

When he came out-of-doors, two men were hosing lawns across the streets and chatting across a dividing hedge. Hub leaned against a lamp post, waiting.

"Where are we going to meet?" he asked. "Every club must have a place."

Gabby thought a moment. "How about the Hiding House, Steve?"

This time Steve's enthusiasm was really aroused. There was no doubt but that the Hiding House was the place. On a winter's night, with a fire going on the hearth, there would be some bully times.

They had reached the street leading to the Waterford railroad station. Gabby decided to run down and tell Mr. Todd the news. Steve hesitated.

"Oh, come on," cried Hub.

Gregor had quit his summer job when school opened, and Mr. Todd was now alone. They found him tinkering with an automobile engine. His shirt was very dirty, and the ground was littered with tools, and engine parts, and grease. There were even streaks of grease through his beard. Without hesitation he wiped his hands on his shirt bosom and sat down to hear Gabby's story.

Gabby made the most of his opportunity. He told a harrowing tale of Hub's trials and enlarged considerably on the locker incident.

Mr. Todd slapped his hands on his knees. "Didn't old 'Lias tell you?"

Gabby next told of the club. The old man's eyes actually sparkled.

"It does n.e good to see boys o' spirit," he said feelingly. "Organizin' a secret society when the

THE IVY CLUB

school says there shan't be no secret societies. Now ain't that fine!"

Steve was uneasy. "We don't exactly mean it for a secret society, Mr. Todd. They expelled boys two years ago for starting a society."

"Tush!" cried the old man; "o' course it's a secret society. Meets in secret and stands together. I almost feel like joinin'. Independence is what old 'Lias likes for to see. Now let those uppity teachers try to be high-handed."

"Just let them," Gabby said darkly. "How about it, Steve?"

"Oh, Steve's game," said Hub.

"I guess it's all right," Steve said weakly; and Elias Todd fell to cackling with laughter as though he saw trouble for somebody in the future.

CHAPTER V

TWO BELOW ZERO

THE Ivy Club gave no sign that some day it planned to defy school authority. Hub, Gab and Steve accepted lectures and punishments meekly. But one day, as they walked home from the football field, Gabby decided that they should devise a means by which they could call a meeting, should occasion arise, right in the school itself under the teachers' noses.

"Every secret society has a sign," he said, "and we ought to have one, too."

"All right," said Steve. "We'll meet in the Hiding House at half-past seven."

Sometime before the hour he went to the Hiding House and lit a candle. The pale, sickly light flickered ghost-like on the walls. The corners were dark. Tramp came patting in from out-of-doors, and Steve gave a nervous jump.

"Blame it all," he cried, "why did you do that?" There was plenty of cut wood about, and he gathered sticks and built a fire on the hearth. The flames, leaping and falling, made the place look

TWO BELOW ZERO

twice as big and twice as bare. Now and then a burning stick cracked and sent the sparks flying; and in the stillness the sound seemed to echo back from the dark rafters. Hiding House! Steve's flesh grew cold. The name held a suggestion of terror that was entirely lacking in the broad light of day. He edged toward the door, and just then came the sound of voices outside.

"He's got a fire going," cried Gabby. "Say, Steve, come out in the road and see the shadows on the windows. Looks like ghosts dancing. Mr. Todd says a lot of these old houses are haunted."

"You're crazy," said Hub, but he looked about him uneasily as he entered. Steve threw more wood on the fire. They drew up blocks of wood and sat facing the blaze. Out-of-doors the branches of the trees whimpered and sighed.

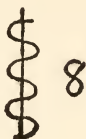
"Say," Gabby said with a shiver, "can't somebody shut the door?"

Hub Morgan closed it. Gabby breathed more easily and spoke of the need of a gathering sign for the club.

"I'd like a sign we could use on the bulletin board right outside Mr. Lane's door," Hub said daringly.

Gabby became lost in thought. He began to twist a coat button, and did not stop until he had pulled it off. Slowly he leaned forward, and with one

finger wrote in the warm ashes of the hearth this mystic sign:



“What does it mean?” Hub asked.

“The straight line is a wall,” said Gabby, “and the curved line is the ivy. The eight means that we are to meet at eight o’clock. Write that on the bulletin board and the whole school will wonder what it’s all about.”

“Suppose we are seen writing the sign?” Steve asked.

“That’s where the adventure comes in,” said Gabby. Steve wondered if Gabby would ever be the one to run the risk.

The fire died down. Suddenly Hub noticed that the candle had burned out. Almost all of the room was in darkness.

“Why do they call this the Hiding House?” he asked.

“Because a man hid here in the Revolutionary days,” said Steve.

“Was he killed?”

Gabby discovered on the instant that it was time to go home. Steve tramped out the fire and they all hurried to the door and legged it across the road.

TWO BELOW ZERO

The door was left open to bang back and forth through the night with the wind.

Next day they told their experience to Mr. Todd. The Jitney Man shook his head wisely.

"There ain't no reason to be scared afore midnight," he said. "Nobody ain't ever set eyes on ghosts afore midnight—except in graveyards."

"You come to the next meeting, Mr. Todd," Steve invited.

But the old man suddenly discovered that his heart was at him again. "Old 'Lias better stay home," he said, and quickly dropped the subject.

The football season ran along, and changes began to take place in the Waterford squad. Steve was told that there wasn't a chance for him; nevertheless he continued to don a uniform and come out, and more than once Captain Carpenter put him in the practice when either the school team or the scrub was short-handed. Gabby remained with the squad, and carried himself with a ridiculously superior air.

But his triumph was short-lived. The next day Mr. Frost came to the field, to be instantly surrounded by boys who clamored for his advice, jerked at his arms, and threatened to rip his coat. Like a big brother he bore with them, giving this one the advice sought, dismissing another with a slap of good fellowship, poking another playfully in the ribs. By and by the practice started, and soon Gabby's ability as a center was under close

scrutiny. The squad stood around idly while he was kept passing to a quarterback.

"Watson," Mr. Frost said patiently, "you don't get the idea. Your passing must be the same each time—just so low, just so fast. Now try again."

Gabby passed.

"Good! Now make that your standard. Try again."

The next pass was too slow, and the third pass was too spirited.

"Here; don't try to throw in through him. Again, Watson."

Gabby did not appreciate the time and effort the teacher was giving to his instruction. This time, instead of passing the ball, he reached it back through his legs with exaggerated carefulness and waited for the quarterback to take it from him. Several of the players laughed.

"That's all," said Mr. Frost. A little mischief the teacher could forgive—he understood boys—but insolence was another matter. He walked off a few steps and talked earnestly to Carpenter. Gabby, puffing from his exertions, strutted about and winked at Steve.

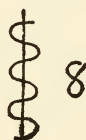
"Watson," said Mr. Frost, "we won't have any further need of your services."

Gabby's face grew blank. Somebody giggled, and without a word he swung around and stalked

from the field. Steve hesitated, undecided whether to follow his friend or to stay.

"There's room for you in the scrub, Steve," Carpenter called.

He played until the practice ended. On the way back he disdained the sidewalks and walked in the road. Dry, dead leaves lay in drifts against the curbstones. They rattled about his ankles, and occasionally he swung his foot and scattered them lustily. When he arrived at the locker room, most of the players were standing in a circle as though studying something that mystified them. On the floor was a sign written in chalk:



"I've heard of handwriting on the wall," Carpenter said, "but handwriting on the floor is something new. Anybody know what it is all about?"

Steve retreated to his locker for fear they would see the guilty knowledge in his face. The sign of the Ivy Club had been used in school for the first time. As Steve dressed he was not particularly worried because Gabby, angered at Mr. Frost's decision, had called a meeting for eight o'clock. What made him uneasy was the fact that he was out of all sympathy with the meeting. His liking for Mr.

Frost was growing, and he thought that Gabby had got just what he deserved.

"Aren't you supposed to do any home studying?" Mr. Benton asked that night when Steve appeared in the dining-room with his cap.

"Why—yes, sir. I'm only going as far as the Hiding House. As soon as I come back——"

"Oh! all right."

Out-of-doors, Steve whistled for Tramp, and when the dog appeared walked boldly into the Hiding House. By the time Gabby and Hub arrived he had the place warm and cozy. He had two old lamps to-night, and they were a wonderful improvement on the solitary candle. There were no dark corners, and no creepy shadows.

"This fool wrote the club signal on our sidewalk," Hub said angrily. "My mother gave a tramp something to eat this morning, and she thought the sign was a signal for other tramps to ask for food. I had to go out and scrub it off."

"It didn't kill you," said Gabby. He was plainly still in a bad humor. Tramp stretched off in the warmth of the hearth-fire and watched him through half-closed eyes.

"What are we going to do about this outrage?" Hub asked humorously.

"You want sympathy when things go wrong with you," Gabby retorted. "Doesn't anybody else count?"

TWO BELOW ZERO

Steve thought that Gabby was getting pretty close to the truth.

"What are we going to do about it?" Hub asked. "That's the point."

It developed that there was really nothing they could do. Gabby picked up a stick and raised his hand to throw it away. Instantly Tramp was on his feet, growling and showing his teeth.

Steve's eyes narrowed. "Did you ever hit him with anything? Is that why he doesn't like you?"

"What would I hit him for?" Gabby demanded hastily, and dropped the stick behind his back.

"I just bet you did," said Hub.

The chill of fall had hardened the ground. Out-of-doors there was a sharp step. In spite of the fire and the lamps the boys drew toward each other. Tramp arose, cocked his ears, and then relaxed. The door opened and Mr. Benton entered.

"Have you seen my claw-hammer, Steve?" he asked. His eyes swept the group and rested with frowning recognition on Gabby. Gabby grew flustered and looked down at the floor. He did not lift his eyes until Mr. Benton had gone.

The interruption broke up the first special meeting of the Ivy Club. When Steve got back to the house, his father was reading in the dining-room. He had left his books upstairs; but now they were on the table where he could not help seeing them. He looked at his father suspiciously, but Mr. Ben-

ton was apparently absorbed in his newspaper. Steve drew up a chair and opened his commercial geography.

Not long afterwards Mr. Tarkan came to the house. His face reflected a grave concern. There had been a bill before congress, a measure planned to bring good to a great number of people. The evening newspapers said that Congressman Shields, of the Waterford district, had that day voted against it.

"We made a mistake, John, in nominating Shields," Mr. Tarkan said. "He doesn't measure up to what we have a right to expect of him."

Mr. Benton nodded. "I've been afraid of something like this. There's a young lawyer at the other end of the county, a chap named Kerrigan."

"I know him," Mr. Tarkan nodded; "honest and independent. Shields will be up for renomination year after next. We are plain people, and we don't need men of the Shields stamp."

Steve drank in every word. This was far more important than books—this was history in the making. His lesson was forgotten.

"Well, Steve," Mr. Tarkan said suddenly, "what are you studying?"

"Commercial geography, sir."

Mr. Tarkan glanced at the open page. "The middle west. Well, Steve, how does the middle

TWO BELOW ZERO

west ship to its South American markets and what does it receive in exchange?"

Steve's ideas were hazy. Mr. Tarkan changed the subject.

"Who will be our next congressman?"

"Mr. Kerrigan, sir." All too late the boy saw how he had been trapped.

"Suppose you say good-night to Mr. Tarkan and study upstairs," Mr. Benton said dryly.

Steve departed sheepishly. By and by, when his work was done, he came down. His mother was mixing bread dough in the kitchen. Mr. Tarkan was gone, and his father was alone again in the dining-room.

"Steve," he said kindly, "I do not want you to repeat what you heard to-night. It would stir up a rumpus in our political party, and we're not ready. When you are a man I want to see you interested in politics. The man who does not inform himself about public questions is a bad citizen. But just now, schoolbooks come first."

Something within Steve thrilled as it always did when Mr. Tarkan and his father spoke of their country and the men who sat in the congress of the United States. This then was the meaning of a republic: a land where plain men could gather and decide who should make their laws.

His mother's work in the kitchen was done. He

followed her upstairs, unconsciously stepping lightly on the three treads that always squeaked.

"Mom," he said, "what did dad fix with the claw-hammer?"

"To-night?"

"Yes."

"There was nothing fixed to-night."

Steve went up to his room thoughtfully. Then his father had come to the Hiding House just to see what boys were there.

Saturday he paid a visit to Mr. Todd. The place was in confusion. All last winter the pipe of the old-fashioned stove had leaned at a risky angle, but Mr. Todd had not bothered to fix it. This morning it had at last fallen with a crash of dust and soot. Gabby and two other boys, in a fog of smoke, were trying to repair the damage. Mr. Todd, his beard unkempt, his eyes watery, was coughing and sputtering and gagging over his tobacco.

"Darn it!" Gabby grumbled.

"Let it be, boys," Mr. Todd said weakly. "Old 'Lias will manage somehow." He coughed hollowly.

"Aw, we'll fix it," Gabby muttered.

"You're a good boy, Gabby," the old man assured him. "It ain't everybody would bother 'bout an old man who ain't a drop's blood to 'em. There's that there Congressman Shields now."

TWO BELOW ZERO

Steve was in the doorway where he could get a breath of fresh air. At the sound of the name he edged into the shop.

"I put in for a pension," Mr. Todd went on, "and what do he do? Tells me the records shows that I signed on when the Rebellion was 'most over and ain't got no pension comin'. Is that fair?"

"You didn't get shot in battle, did you?" Gabby asked.

"No, but I got 'bout as bad—I got rheumatics. There was a recruitin' rally in the rain, and I went down and 'listed. Don't folks get the rheumatics from gettin' wet? These here statesmen just go down to Washington to get rich."

"My father says they're all alike," said Gabby.

"Well——" Mr. Todd shifted his tobacco.—
"I've been a democrat these forty years, Gabby. I guess the democrats are a mite better."

Steve felt uncomfortable. His father and Mr. Tarkan didn't say things like that. Presently the pipe was in place again and the fog began to clear. Mr. Todd brought out some cold potatoes and a can of corned beef. Gabby hacked at the can with a hatchet, and one of the others began to compound a hash in a greasy pan.

"This is what I calls real comfort," Mr. Todd said genially.

Gabby came toward Steve. "You might have

HIGH BENTON

given a fellow a hand," he complained. "You ought not to get any hash."

"I don't want any," Steve answered. "The team plays its first game to-day. Going?"

"After the way Mr. Frost treated me?"

"I'm going."

"There's the Ivy Club for you," Gabby said bitterly. Just then Mr. Todd cried that the hash was burning, and Gabby rushed toward the stove. Steve came away. It began to dawn on him that he rarely heard Mr. Todd say a good word about anybody.

The game that day was at Rivermouth, a big town at the point where Snake river joined the wide stream that flowed to the sea. Steve had never before made the trip, and as the County Line trolley carried him toward his destination he pressed his face against the window and watched the country through which he passed. After forty minutes of riding, the car suddenly topped a hill and Rivermouth came into view spread out on the flat below.

The sight of the stream caused Steve's eyes to open wide. Occasionally a small boat would come up Snake river with raw materials for the factories at Smoky Hollow; but on the stream below he could see many busy vessels all in one short stretch. A small tug, lashed between two ponderous barges, panted as though in agony. A double-decked pas-

TWO BELOW ZERO

senger boat, all white paint and shining brass, steamed through the water at a speed that seemed miraculous. There was a black, grimy steamer evidently in from foreign ports, a scow loaded with sand, and a sluggish sailing vessel whose pits and deck were piled with red bricks. Steve watched fascinated until the stream was shut off from view by the houses of the town itself.

He had no difficulty in finding the football field. The game was on, and he walked around the sidelines looking for a familiar face. Just as he had concluded that he was the only Waterford spectator there he came upon Gregor Helsing kneeling a-top a pile of sweaters. He was of two minds whether to stop. Gregor decided the issue.

"Hello, Steve; climb up here."

He took a place on the pile, and stared silently at the field. Soon Waterford worked a back-field man around the end for a long run.

"B-e-a-u-t-i-f-u-l!" cried Gregor.

Steve's tongue was loosened. "How long have they been playing?"

"About five minutes. We ought to score now."

But it wasn't until the closing minute of the quarter that Waterford got the ball across the goal line. Theirs were the only two rejoicing voices around the field, and Rivermouth students looked at them blackly.

After that the game became a grim battle. For

HIGH BENTON

the most part the ball remained near the center of the field. Neither side seemed to be able to advance. Kicks were blocked, forward passes went wrong, and now the Rivermouth and now the Waterford line would become a stone wall. However, with seven points to Waterford's credit and with her goal line in no danger, Steve and Gregor found nothing in the situation to alarm them.

When the referee's whistle shrilled the half, Steve found that he was hugging the sweater of Will Adams, a boy of his own class, who played right end. Will snuggled into the garment and grinned broadly.

"Some game, isn't it?" he asked.

"Pretty good game, I think," said Steve. He joined the team as it walked back and forth discussing its plans for the second half. When the whistle blew to resume play, he held out his hand and Will Adams threw him back the sweater.

Rivermouth kicked off—and Will Adams dropped the ball. A charging end fell upon it on the fifteen-yard line. For the first time in the game Waterford's goal was in acute danger.

"Hold them, fellows," cried Gregor. "Hold them, Waterford."

Rivermouth's first plunge at the line netted a scant yard.

"That's telling them something," cried Steve. "Everybody hold tight."

TWO BELOW ZERO

The next try brought no gain.

"W-a-t-e-r-f-o-r-d!" Steve and Gregor spelled in unison. "Waterford, Waterford, Waterford!"

Then Rivermouth ripped around Will Adams's end for seven yards. It was fourth down and two yards to gain.

Steve and Gregor forgot to cry encouragement. Their hearts were pounding. They saw the Rivermouth center pass the ball, they saw a scurry, a confused movement in the back field——

"Dropped ball," cried Gregor. "They've dropped the ball, Steve."

Will Adams popped out of the squirming mass and scooted down the field. Twenty-five yards farther on he was downed. But Waterford's line was out of danger—and Waterford had the ball.

"That just about settles this game," said Gregor. He was right. Rivermouth did not threaten again. When the game was over the Waterford players came clamoring for their sweaters, laughing, and talking, and slapping each other's backs in the joy of victory.

"I felt like a monkey when I dropped that kick," Will Adams confessed cheerfully. "And then when I made that run I felt like a hero."

Captain Carpenter laughed. "And first I felt like murdering you," he said, "and then I felt like hugging you."

Quite naturally Steve and Gregor walked off to-

HIGH BENTON

gether toward the trolley. Autumn dusk was settling over the land as the car climbed the hill and began to leave the town behind. The river was misty. River craft, like gray ghosts, went their way, their red and green lights riding high, their whistles blowing mysterious signals.

"I never tire of watching ships come and go," said Gregor. "I often wonder where they are bound, what they carry and what they'll bring back. A Waterford shop may make a simple screw, and it may some day be taken bright and shiny from its box and used by some trader in the African jungles. Did you ever stop to think where goods go after they're made?"

Steve had not.

"It's interesting," said Gregor.

But Steve was interested in things nearer home—how soon Snake river would freeze, whether the half-yearly examinations in December would be hard, and whether Mr. Todd would keep his promise and build a bob for use on Smoky Hollow Hill.

Gregor smiled wisely.

"Mr. Todd does put things off," Steve admitted. However, there would be plenty of fun this winter without a bob. He told about the Hiding House, and the fire on the hearth, and of the things that would be cooked when the nights were cold. Suddenly he realized that the other boy had never been

TWO BELOW ZERO

inside the old building. "You ought to come around some night," he invited impulsively.

"I'll be glad to," Gregor said.

Almost immediately Steve regretted the invitation. Gabby and Hub would not like it; on second thought he decided to tell them nothing. Gregor might never take it into his head to come.

Monday morning he found Gabby waiting for him near the house. Gabby's ill-humor of Saturday was gone.

"Come down to the Opera House," he cried. "We have time before school. I want to show you something."

The Waterford Opera House was in reality a store made over into a moving picture theater. The front was vividly decorated with green and white paint, and gaudy theatrical posters were pasted on boards, hung on either side of the ticket booth. One board was marked "Coming Wednesday." Steve stared hard at the picture shown there. One face in the background——

"Freckles Smith!" he cried suddenly.

"My mother says she wouldn't let me look that foolish in public for five thousand dollars," Gabby said enviously.

Next day the story of Freckles's coming was in the Waterford *Sentinel* on the front page. Wednesday football practice had to be abandoned because every member of the squad was at the

HIGH BENTON

Opera House. Even Mr. Todd resurrected a boiled shirt and a collar and tie and went off to the performance with a chew of tobacco in the side of his jaw.

Hub, Gabby and Steve had seats well down front. The first picture concerned the adventures of a very fat man who was bombarded with custard pies, rolled in a barrel and finally dropped from a balloon into a lake. He made a wonderful splash. Mr. Todd's giggles of enjoyment could be heard all over the house.

Then came Freckles Smith's moment of glory. His picture was entitled "The Golden Snare." A nugget of gold had been hidden, and the principal theme of the picture had to do with the number of men who were killed before the gold was found. The first time Freckles came on the screen the audience laughed. Every now and then, as the plot developed, he reappeared, always with a sheepish grin and always winning his laugh. In fact the audience laughed without quite knowing why.

Steve had heard of people who were used in moving pictures because they were "types." Plainly, then, Freckles was a type. His goings and comings on the screen had nothing to do with the plot. He was moved about to relieve the action whenever it became too tense. He was simply used for a ludicrous purpose. Steve felt a real pity for him.

TWO BELOW ZERO

This wasn't being a motion picture actor; this was drawing a weekly salary for playing the clown.

When "The End" was flashed Steve led the way out-of-doors. The first picture was to be shown again for late comers.

"Wasn't that the limit?" cried Hub.

"Freckles always was a wooden head," said Gabby. "My mother says——"

"S-s-s-s-sh!" Steve warned.

Mrs. Smith swept proudly from the Opera House attended by several neighbors. Behind her back they nudged each other and smiled. Steve felt even sorrier for poor Freckles. And then Mr. Todd came forth.

The old man had taken off his collar and tie, and a tie end dangled from one pocket.

"You didn't wear a collar button in the back of your shirt, Mr. Todd," Gabby said.

"Collar buttons and choker collars is for dudes," Mr. Todd said tartly. Even the neck-band of the shirt seemed to bother him.

"What did you think of the picture, Mr. Todd?" Hub asked.

The old man closed one eye shrewdly. "You ain't lettin' them fool you that was a picture, Hubbie?"

"Of course it was a picture."

"Play actin', Hubbie; just play actin'. Why did

they make everything dark? To fool folks; but they can't fool old 'Lias."

"How about the time the man fell into the lake, Mr. Todd? You couldn't put a lake and an airship on that stage."

Mr. Todd shifted his tobacco. "No tellin', Hubbie. Didn't a fellow once take a rabbit out o' my hat? I was wearin' 'hat hat all day; guess I've a-knowed if a rabbit was livin' in it. Ain't any harder to take rabbits from folks' hats than to make a lake," and the old man walked off deeply contented with his logic.

Carpenter, Will Adams and a group of players came from the Opera House. "And we gave up an afternoon's practice for *that*," the captain said in disgust.

The football season ran to its end. The team gave a dinner in the old-fashioned dining-room of the Waterford House. On a stand, in the center of the table, lay a football. Prof. Lane had been invited, and promptly on the hour he was seen to enter the hotel. Leaning on his cane, he came as far as the dining-room door. All at once the expression on his face changed. Without a word he drew back, turned, and was gone.

"One of his sudden headaches," Mr. Frost said gently to the thunderstruck boys. Next day the story was all over the school.

"Maybe he's crazy," Gabby said in awe.

TWO BELOW ZERO

Up to that point, in spite of spells of idleness, Steve had been what might be termed a fair student. He did not rank with the leaders of his class, but neither did he sink to the level of Hub or Gabby, both of whom carried a frank air of don't care. By this time the halls and stairs and class-rooms had lost their sense of newness and had become familiar ground. He began to absorb some of the unwritten laws of the school. Mr. Lane, it appeared, believed that no boy should be expelled during his first two years if he half-way tried.

"When you come to high school," Carpenter explained, "there's a complete break-away from the grades—new studies, a different teacher for every subject, and a different feeling about everything. In the grades you're a boy; here they begin to treat you like a man. Some fellows get used to it pretty quickly; others take a long time. It's the same way in college, my brother tells me: the first year is the hardest. Mr. Lane believes in giving every fellow a chance. He's pretty square, Steve."

"I guess he is," Steve said absently. His mind was suddenly relieved with respect to the December examinations. Evidently he had nothing to fear even if his marks were a bit low. He hurried to Hub and Gabby with the news. They looked at each other and grinned broadly.

"Such being the case," said Hub, "should we worry?"

HIGH BENTON

"I guess not," said Gabby. His suspenders had broken, and he had tightened his trousers in the back with a safety pin. It was necessary to hitch them ever so often.

"You *are* sloppy," Hub said. "It wouldn't take a minute to sew those suspenders."

"Why don't you mind your own business," Gabby said angrily.

Steve did not plan to take advantage of what Carpenter had told him. But always, in the back of his head, was the knowledge that he could take a goodly share of failures and yet not suffer any great punishment. Scarcely conscious of the process, he began to neglect his work. If Hub or Gabby came whistling up the old wagon road, if there was a delectable dish to be cooked in the gloom of Mr. Todd's shop, if some boy bought a trap and wanted company while he went out on the Snake river flats to set it for muskrat, or if a party of Waterford boys went to the woods north of the county road to build a fire and enjoy a "shin roast," it was always easy for him to tell himself that he could skip to-morrow's lesson "just this once." Mr. Tarkan and his father were busy nights planning the fight on Congressman Shields; his books were no longer left on the dining-room table. One failure led to another. Slowly he lost standing in his class.

Now and then he had flurries of contrition. Mr.

TWO BELOW ZERO

Frost, standing beside his desk with a hand on his shoulder and saying quietly, "You can do better than that, Benton," had power to move him to pledges of reform—and for a day or two he would carry a book home to dinner and skim through a subject on his way back to school. He developed a marvelous sixth sense that told him just when Mr. Garfunkel, standing ponderously in front of the room, would lower his head and open his eyes, and under cover of the desk he would prop a textbook on his knees and study for the next period.

Mr. Frost was one teacher he never fooled—and never tried to fool. On several occasions he wormed and squirmed successfully through a period, only to have the teacher detain him at the door and tell him that he had not prepared. Had it been any other teacher, Steve would have grumbled, "What's he kicking about? Didn't I give the right answers?" Confronted with Mr. Frost's air of comradeship, he was powerless to attempt deception or to pretend indifference.

"You'd lead this class, Benton, if you'd buckle in," Mr. Frost would say. "Why don't you play the game? It's only a few years."

"I'm going to," Steve would mutter—and would mean it at the time.

It was in Miss Cooper's room that he accumulated most of his demerits. Miss Cooper's sarcasm filled him with hot rebellion. "Treasure Island"

HIGH BENTON

and "Kidnapped" were among the dearest of his home possessions, but he grew to wish fervently that Stevenson and his donkey had died peacefully in the Pyrenees. The day came when Miss Cooper sent him to Mr. Lane's office for stolid refusal to recite.

Steve had to knock three times before the principal heard him. Mr. Lane sat at his desk as though ill. Out-of-doors it was raw and sieeting, and little trickles of ice were forming on the trees and turning them a frosty, ghosty gray. At sight of the boy the principal braced his shoulders and smiled—and all at once Steve was genuinely sorry that he had come on this errand.

"Why wouldn't you recite, Stephen?" the principal asked gently.

Steve made no answer. How could he say that he was angry because Miss Cooper had called him a chuckle-head?

Mr. Lane reached for a volume in a rack. It was Stevenson's "Travels with a Donkey." Within a few minutes Steve was deeply interested. Suddenly the office clock struck three.

"There," Mr. Lane said humorously, "you had a whole period in private, and I meant to give you but a few minutes. You ought to like Stevenson."

"I do, sir."

"Then there's no reason why Miss Cooper should send you here again."

TWO BELOW ZERO

Steve felt that he was disarmed. He would now have to keep his English record clean. As he closed the door he could see Mr. Lane's shoulders beginning to sag. Why was it that he was beginning to like Mr. Lane so much, and yet continuing to fear him a little? Why did the principal walk the streets of the town in the dead of night? Why had he turned away so abruptly from the banquet?

That afternoon Steve and his crowd looked in at Mr. Todd on their way home. The old man had made coffee and was frying liver.

"Come on in, Stevie," he called. "You're just in time. Come on in, Gabbie, and cut some bread. And there's Hubbie. I was just hopin' somebody would come along and finish fryin' so I could sit down. You be cook, Hubbie."

The out-of-doors was wet and icy. The hot coffee smelled good. Steve, after leaving Mr. Lane's office, had made some good resolutions—but the coffee was too great a temptation.

"It ain't everybody as is comfortable as this to-day," Mr. Todd boasted as he attacked his fourth sandwich. "Boys sent to high school an' college for learnin'. Huh! What for? Here we sits enjoyin' our victuals, and if we was millionaires we couldn't buy us any better. A man ain't able to wear but one suit o' clothes at a time, is he? Old 'Lias says that all this education is a cheat. Make more coffee, Hubbie."

HIGH BENTON

"Steve was sent to Mr. Lane's office to-day," Gabby said.

"Was you, Stevie? I hope you told the old cripple somethin'. You know why they calls them high schools? 'Cause the teachers gets whoppin' high salaries, and the taxpayers gets whoopin' high tax bills, and the boys gets highfalutin' notions. There's that there Aaron Todd. Had to slick his shoes every mornin', he did, and wear a clean collar every day 'stead o' only Sundays. And what came of it? Didn't he try to come here and live off o' old 'Lias? Makes me sick, that's what it does."

But Mr. Todd's sickness did not interfere with his appetite for a fifth sandwich, nor did his distress spoil the hunger of the others. Steve had no appetite for supper.

"I'm afraid, Steve, you've been eating at Mr. Todd's again," said his mother.

"We had liver sandwiches," Steve acknowledged.

"Todd's?" Mr. Benton looked sharply across the table. "I suppose he still vilifies his brother Aaron?"

"Why, yes, sir," Steve answered in surprise.

"Humph! I imagine you could keep better company."

Steve was thunderstruck. What did his father know about Aaron, the worthless? Everything in Waterford was taking on an air of mystery.

Right after Thanksgiving there was iceskating

TWO BELOW ZERO

in the clay pits in back of Smoky Hollow where a brick company had once operated. Then, in December, came the first snow. A group of boys went to Mr. Todd's to see about the bob, and Mr. Todd put his hand to his breast and coughed hollowly, and didn't see how he was going to last out the winter. Not that anybody would care, though, if he did die.

"Aw, we're not mad, Mr. Todd," Gabby muttered, and led the others away.

On Smoky Hollow hill Steve's flexible sled proved to be as fast as any in Waterford, and he trained Tramp to jump on behind and enjoy the fun. Gabby generally came to the hill empty-handed and stood around and begged for rides.

"I'm wise to you," Hub told him. "You get no rides from me. You're too lazy to go home for your own sled."

Gabby started to walk away in outraged dignity, but he heard something about a meeting at the Hiding House that night and came back.

"The Waterford Meat Market owes me two pounds of sausages for some work I did," Hub said. "We'll broil them in front of the fire. Who'll furnish bread?"

"I will," said Steve. Gabby thought he could bring mustard, and wanted to know how many sandwiches there would be to the pound. Hub looked at him suspiciously, and told him.

HIGH BENTON

"About five sandwiches apiece," said Gabby, and hitched his overcoat as though it didn't fit him.

As Steve stood at the top of the hill waiting his turn to go down, Gregor Helsing toiled up the ascent and halted beside him.

"Remember the invitation you gave me to come to the Hiding House?" Gregor asked. "Could I come to-night?"

"Why—why, yes," Steve stammered. Here was a complication. He waited for Hub to come to the top, and then called him and Gabby aside.

"That time I went to Rivermouth I invited Gregor to come to the Hiding House," he said. Then, innocently: "Did I ever tell you?"

They shook their heads.

"Well——"

"I'll bet he wants to come to-night," Hub said quickly.

Steve nodded. On the whole they took the news with better grace than he had anticipated. Hub made practically no objection. Gabby, after a frowning moment, thought that Gregor might be coming to spy.

"Forget it," said Hub.

Gabby thought for another moment. "Now there'll be only about three sandwiches apiece," he said.

It was colder that night than it had been at any time since winter started. As Steve stood in front

TWO BELOW ZERO

of the hearth after lighting the lamps and building the fire he could hear the Hiding House creaking as though the frost was binding the timbers. Close by the hearth it was warm, but ten feet away his breath turned to steam. He fixed the seats so that there would be room for Gregor, and took a wire broiler from a nail above the work bench. Tramp sniffed at the broiler and coiled himself in the warmth.

Hub was the first to arrive, carrying the sausages under his arm. Gregor came next. Steve took a lamp and showed him around. He was keenly interested in the two bullet holes.

"I imagine they have a history," he said. "Did you ever try to learn anything about them?"

Steve shook his head.

"You ought to," said Gregor.

Then Gabby bustled in. "Gee!" he cried, "I forgot the mustard."

Hub gave him a withering look. "You needn't forget to close the door."

Seated before the fire they watched the sparks go swirling up the chimney with the winter draught. Hub raked a bed of coals to the front and held the sausages over the glow. The fat in the meat began to sizzle and drip. The smell of it was good. The whine of the outdoor wind seemed far, far away.

Gabby tried to coax Tramp with a piece of meat.

HIGH BENTON

The dog growled and moved away from him, and stuck its nose in Gregor's lap. Gabby was nettled.

"Going to work for Mr. Todd next summer?" he asked.

"I suppose so," Gregor answered.

"It must be tough to work instead of having a good time."

"You enjoy the good time more if you earn it," Gregor said calmly.

Hub grinned, and Gabby's face grew fiery red. Taking a stick he traced the call of the Ivy Club in the cooling ashes. Gregor looked at the sign and frowned.

"Didn't somebody once write that on the locker-room floor?" he asked.

"I did," said Gabby with an air of bravado. "It's the sign of our club. Teachers can't have everything their own way."

"Oh!" Gregor flashed a look at Steve, and then at Hub.

"It isn't a real school secret society," Steve said hurriedly.

A constraint fell upon the gathering. Gabby dared not meet the eyes that glared at him. For the first time they seemed to notice that the air at their backs was cold. Gregor stood up and went back to the bullet holes as though fascinated by their promise of romance. Steve began to stamp out the

fire. Gabby edged toward the door, and when Gregor departed, hurried out at his heels.

"That's just like him," Hub said angrily. "First he talks too much and then he runs away."

The weather stayed cold. There were two days of terrific wind, a wind that broke branches from trees and whipped frozen snow from the roofs of houses and drove it around the corners of Waterford like hail. Men, muffled to the ears, built fires near fire-hydrants to keep them from freezing. It was indoor weather; and because there was nothing more exciting to engage him Steve turned for a brief period to his books.

The third day, in his capacity as president of the Board of Education, Mr. Tarkan paid a visit to the high school. Steve, in Mr. Archer's room, was luckily prepared. He recited a rule of algebra without hesitation. Hub stood tongue-tied when called to his feet.

"An off day, Morgan?" Mr. Tarkan asked.

"On the contrary," said Mr. Archer, "a regular day."

"Oh! What is his record in other classes?"

"He is poor in everything," said the teacher.

"Morgan," Mr. Tarkan said sternly, "you are sent to high school to get an education that will enable you to lift yourself higher in the world. That's what high school really means. Do you know what happens to boys who follow your road?"

"They are either expelled or dropped out. They sink into a small-salaried job, and they stay there for life and become a nobody."

Hub's face darkened. He didn't relish that "nobody."

"The next time I visit the school," Mr. Tarkan said, "let me find you trying to be a somebody."

Hub said nothing. During the remainder of the period he scowled in his seat, and at noontime he hurried to the cloak-room and disappeared.

"I don't blame him for being sore," said Gabby. "Say, it's starting to snow again."

The first period of the afternoon was with Mr. Frost. Hub seemed high-strung and restless. At two o'clock the class filed out to go down to Miss Cooper's room for another stage of Stevenson's troublesome journey. Other classes were changing rooms, and the long halls were crowded. There was an air of excitement among the boys and girls who had just left Mr. Archer.

"Something's up," said Gabby.

Soon they knew. Mr. Archer's class, filing in at one o'clock, had found the blackboard decorated with a chalk drawing of a woman with a very big mouth and under it in handwriting: "Mrs. Phyllis Archer." Mr. Archer, the report ran, had grown pale, but had allowed the caricature to remain on the board while he completed the period. Then he had sent for Mr. Lane.

Steve's class took seats in Miss Cooper's room.

TWO BELOW ZERO

Steve thought that Hub looked ill at ease. A messenger came for Miss Cooper, and she left at once. After a time she came back, accompanied by the principal. There was not a sound as Mr. Lane, leaning heavily on his cane, stepped just inside the door.

"Morgan," Miss Cooper said, "go to the board."

Hub walked to the blackboard and selected a piece of chalk.

"Write 'Mrs. Phyllis Archer.'"

Steve felt a shock run along his spine. Hub was plainly shaken. He began to write.

"You're disguising your handwriting," Miss Cooper said sharply.

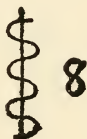
Hub laid down the chalk.

"Come to my office," said Mr. Lane. The class heard him lead the way along the hall, first a firm step, then the tap of the cane, and after that the drag of the lame foot.

Hub did not come back to the room. The period was one of confusion. Three o'clock was a relief. Miss Cooper seemed just as glad to be rid of the class as the class was glad to get away.

On the wall of the vestibule Steve and Gabby found this sign scrawled in chalk:

E149204



HIGH BENTON

Gabby, after a quick look around, rubbed out the message. "Maybe he's at Mr. Todd's," he whispered.

Hub had been there and had gone. The Jitney Man was in a state of great excitement.

"Ain't I always been a-tellin' you?" he cackled shrilly. "Them teachers can peck a boy, but a boy dassent peck back. 'Tain't fair. I give Hubbie credit, I do. If he goes out to get him a job, I'll give him a recommend, I will."

In silence Steve crossed the shop toward the hot stove, stepping carefully, for the floor was strewn with a motley collection of greasy nuts and bolts. Since Gregor had gone back to school the place had not had a real cleaning.

"Well," Mr. Todd demanded, "what are you boys goin' to do 'bout it?" He lowered his voice. "Revolution! How did we Americans become free and original? Revolution! That's the trick for high-steppin' young men. You listen to old 'Lias."

Steve and Gabby gave each other startled glances.

"You ain't a-goin' to back out on Hubbie, are you, boys?"

"I—I guess not," said Gabby, and Mr. Todd gave a cackle of triumphant laughter.

By dark the storm was over. Steve went to the Hiding House and started the fire. The old building was like an ice-house. After a moment he started for the front of the house with a snow

TWO BELOW ZERO

shovel. It would be easier to clean the walks now before the snow had been trampled down.

He had scarcely started work when Gabby appeared blowing on his hands and stamping his feet. "Gee!" he said, "it's cold. Got a fire going in the Hiding House? Guess I'll go in and wait for you." At the gate he paused. "Say, is Tramp tied up?"

"No."

Gabby came back and waited, grumbling under his breath. Just as Steve finished, Hub came down the road.

In silence they plowed through the deep snow around in the rear of Steve's home. The Hiding House was still cold; they sat near the fire and kept on their overcoats. Hub jabbed the logs with a stick.

"Did you tell your father?" Gabby asked.

Hub shook his head. "Going to stand by me?" he asked.

Gabby gave Steve a quick look.

"Back out on me as soon as anything happens," Hub cried.

"True friends like ivy and the wall."

"Huh! Do you stand by me or don't you?"

"What do you want us to do?" Gabby asked.

"Strike! Haven't you ever read in newspapers about strikes?"

HIGH BENTON

Steve had read of strikes that had continued for weeks. He was frightened. His father would have something to say about him striking for weeks.

"How long is this strike supposed to last?" Gabby asked cautiously.

"About one day, weak-knees," said Hub. "You fellows ought to stay away until they take me back but you haven't the nerve."

They did not deny the charge. One day away from school, Steve thought, would not be so serious.

"Say," said Gabby, "I saw some men fishing for pickerel through the ice on Snake river about half a mile above the old boat-house. If we're not going to school to-morrow let's go fishing."

Steve agreed. Hub accepted the plan gloomily.

When they came from the Hiding House the night had turned wonderfully clear. Objects stood out sharply and distinctly. Their trail across the wagon road was like so many blots of ink upon the crystal whiteness of the snow. And along the road ran a solitary track that crossed theirs and went on.

"That track wasn't there when we went in," Gabby said suspiciously.

They went over and examined it. The marks were plain—the tread of a step, a small deep puncture through the snow crust, and then a deep furrow as though something had been dragged.

TWO BELOW ZERO

"Mr. Lane's been here," Hub said tensely. "Don't you see his cane mark? Who else in Waterford drags his left foot? What was he doing here?"

Steve wished he knew. It was too cold to stand in the road and debate the track. Gabby and Hub went their way, Gabby plainly worried, and Steve ran for the house. Later, as he lay in bed, he wondered if Gregor Helsing had told Mr. Lane anything about the Hiding House, or if the principal had simply come up the road on one of his mysterious walks.

In the morning he had the kitchen to himself for a few minutes. He hurriedly made sandwiches and stuffed them into his pockets. He had no desire for the day, but having joined the club, he felt that he had to do at least one turn in Hub's behalf. With his books under his arm he left the house, only to skulk around to the Hiding House by way of the wagon road. He took a hand line, some hooks embedded in a cork, and a wooden "teller." At the Waterford Meat Market he stopped for bait, and asked the butcher to mind his books.

"I ought to tell your father," the butcher scolded. "The idea of a boy of your age playing hookey. You must want fishing badly to go out with the thermometer two below zero."

"It doesn't feel that cold," said Steve. The butcher took his books and he went out quickly.

HIGH BENTON

The school bell rang as he walked toward Snake river. He heard it plainly, and the sound gave him an unpleasant twitch. He passed the last row of houses on the eastern end of Waterford and was out on what was in summer the meadowland. The coarse, high reeds, dried by the fall winds, had long ago been burned by boys of the town, and now the stubs were hidden by a deep, white blanket. Ahead of him stretched a snowy waste a mile wide, with nothing to show where the land ended and where the ice began. Far away on the opposite side was a barricade of stiff, bare trees to mark the farther shore.

He had steered his course for the old boat-house. It had not been used in years. Once it had stood high on piles; now, in one corner, the piles were broken and the house at that end had tumbled down. There it stood, its naked ribs bare to the winter. But at least it offered shelter from the wind. Steve pulled his neck down inside the collar of his coat and waited. The minutes dragged drearily, but nobody came his way from the direction of the town.

"Maybe they came early," he muttered, "and went right to the hole."

Neither Hub nor Gabby were out on the ice. In the open the wind had an eager thrust. The day really began to feel like two below zero.

There were plenty of traces of the men who had

TWO BELOW ZERO

fished yesterday. A well-tramped trail led toward shore. Following it, Steve found the charcoal of a fire, and a pile of wood that had not been burned. He had matches in his pocket. Ten minutes later a fresh fire burned on the site of the old.

A coating of ice had formed over the fishing hole. Steve broke the film with a heavy stick and flipped out the pieces. He rigged his teller, a piece of wood arranged to lie flat when undisturbed, but to jump upright when anything pulled at the line. He attached his hooks, baited them, and dropped them into the water. When the line was out the proper distance he tied one end to the "teller," and stepped back with his hands in his pockets. No holding a line a day like this.

There was not another soul in sight along the river. Why didn't Gabby and Hub come? He waited impatiently for the first bite. Presently the "teller" jumped. He sprang for the line.

"About a one-pounder," he grinned. He rebaited the line and carried the pickerel toward the fire. In the excitement of the catch his blood had warmed, but now he discovered that handling the wet line had frozen his hands.

The fire had gone down. He threw on more wood, and held his fingers as close to the blaze as he dared. His isolation chilled him. All alone on the river, the only member of the Ivy Club to keep the pledge!

HIGH BENTON

He heard the 10:47 train arrive at the Waterford station. By that time he had three fish, and didn't care if he never caught another. He had never been so cold. When he turned his face to the fire the wind whipped down his back, and when he turned his back to the blaze his chest seemed to grow icy. He tried to eat his sandwiches, but the frost seemed to have penetrated the bread. He was a miserable, wretched, half-frozen boy. What wouldn't he have given to have been snugly in school—even in Miss Cooper's room! He dared not go home before noon. He didn't even dare to be seen wandering the streets of the town for fear somebody who knew his mother would remark his presence.

A scant quarter of a mile away, across the frozen meadows, were the houses of Waterford. He could see the smoke coming from the chimneys, warm smoke. His wood gave out and his fire died. Out at the hole the teller jumped and continued to jerk and throb. He wouldn't have handled that wet line again for all the fish in Snake river. He had never known that the river could be so bleak and so lonely.

"R-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o!" went the noon whistle at the Tarkan-Boylert plant.

Never had he heard a more welcome sound. Stiffly he picked up his three fish strung on a piece of line; the line itself, the hooks, the "teller" he

TWO BELOW ZERO

left where they were. Instead of going back by way of the boat-house, he cut directly across the meadows straight for the town. He wanted to get into a street, to feel the presence of human life around him, to be where houses would save him from the stab of that awful wind.

It was well that he had to break his own trail for the exercise gave him a degree of warmth. He reached the town by one of the side streets. To go home at once was out of the question; his mother would notice how cold he was and would ask questions. He wanted something hot to drink—anything—just so that it was hot. He thought of the lunch-wagon owned by Cruller Joe, and he looked down at the fish. Maybe if he gave Joe the pickerel, Joe would give him a cup of coffee or a bowl of soup. Or perhaps Joe would trust him. Other high school boys had charged a meal there on occasion. Anyway, even if Joe said no, it would be warm in the wagon—warm, warm, warm!

He started up the street, his teeth chattering. At the next corner, out of the corner of his eye, he saw somebody coming toward the intersection. He did not look to see who it was, but continued straight ahead.

“Stephen!” said a voice.

For just an instant he forgot the cold. He did not look around to see who had called him; he did not have to. He recognized Mr. Lane’s voice.

CHAPTER VI

THE IVY CLUB DISBANDS

MR. LANE limped forward slowly, feeling his way over the ground with his cane. Without the fish Steve might have escaped suspicion of having played truant; with them he knew that he was lost. The delivery boy of the Waterford Meat Market came dashing up the road in a cutter that had once been brave with red paint. He had a muffler wrapped about his throat, a cap down over his ears, and appeared to be in a tremendous hurry to deliver somebody's dinner. He had seen Steve leave his books in the shop that morning; now he suddenly called a sharp "Whoa!" and drew up at the curb to hear what was said. It wasn't every day that it was given to him to hear the dialogue when a principal caught a truant red-handed.

"How were they biting, Stephen?" Mr. Lane asked.

"All right, sir." Steve looked to the right and to the left—every place but at the principal. The question and its mildness staggered him.

THE IVY CLUB DISBANDS

"Were you out all morning?"

"Y—yes, sir." Try as he would he could not keep his teeth from chattering. Now would come a demand for an explanation.

The principal caught him by the shoulders and swung him around. He looked up into the man's pale, somber countenance.

"Why, boy, you're chilled through. You must get something to warm you. You're not bound for home? No; no. That's too far. There's a lunch-wagon down four squares. You had better go there." He pulled off his glove and put his hand in his pocket, and Steve saw how blue the hand was and how thin were the veins. "If you haven't money with you——"

"I—I have money," Steve lied huskily. There was no question but that Mr. Lane knew the truth, and yet—— His cheeks burned. He would have frozen rather than accept the help.

"You had better hurry, Stephen," the principal said gently.

Without a word he walked away, and the butcher boy, disappointed, whipped up his horse. For a while Steve could hear the slow tap of the cane behind him, but it grew fainter and finally ceased as he drew ahead. From the front of some houses the snow had not been cleared, and these deep places retarded his shivering progress. Mr. Todd never cleared away snow. He wondered for a

moment why his mind should have turned to Mr. Todd.

The lunch-wagon stood where none would have expected to find a lunch-wagon, in a cleared spot facing the covered shed that served as a stopping point on the line of the county trolley. Just beyond the road dipped down toward Smoky Hollow. In spite of the sleepy look of the spot customers came and went at all hours of the day—workmen from the Smoky Hollow plants, salesmen good-natured or glum according as they had found business, boys with ten cents in their pockets eager for a cup of “Java” and two of the famous crullers, and now and then a lawyer from the county seat with affairs in Waterford.

It seemed to Steve that the last block was the longest of all. At last he stumbled up three little steps that led to a narrow door. A voice from within called to him to pull hard. At the second pull a rush of warm air met him, air that was rich to his cold, hungry senses with a dozen savory odors.

Cruller Joe sat on a table behind the eating counter, his knees hunched up under his white apron. His greasy, black hair was twirled up on one side into a flourishing cow-lick. Cupped within his hands was a harmonica. Evidently he had been playing, and had paused at the sound of feet on the steps.

THE IVY CLUB DISBANDS

"Close the door," he said, "and just listen to this a moment." He twisted his head to one side, puffed out his cheeks, and surrendered himself to his art, apparently forgetting all about the patron who awaited service. At last the effort was done. "I guess that's warbling," he said in frank admiration of his ability. "Well, what can I do you for?" Joe considered this expression "smart."

Steve lifted his arms stiffly and flopped the fish down on the counter. "What will you give me for them?"

The lunch-wagon owner surveyed the pickerel with a professional eye. "What do you want?"

"Something to eat."

"All right; bowl of soup and cup of Java." Then, as Steve hesitated, "and two crullers. What'll it be first, soup or Java?"

"Soup," said Steve, and sank down on one of the stools. Joe lifted the cover from a steaming pot and reached for a thick bowl. Next he put two slices of bread on a plate and sent the plate sliding down the eating counter.

"It's an art," he said. "I can stop the plate right in front of you five times out of six."

Steve ate. Joe took up the harmonica, and played softly and watched him.

"Say, I bet it was cold out on the ice."

Steve nodded. Half the soup was gone, and a

HIGH BENTON

most glorious sense of warmth was creeping through his veins.

"I guess you didn't expect a holiday," Joe said. "I guess a lot of fellows weren't sorry when they dismissed the high school this morning."

Steve paused with a spoonful of soup halfway to his mouth. "Did they dismiss the school?"

"Sure; furnace broke down. Everybody sent home at ten o'clock." There was a cracked mirror on the wall, and Joe took a comb from his pocket, studied the cow-lick and gave it another twirl.

Steve began to eat again. He had stayed out on the ice freezing, and all the while it had been safe for him to go home!

"Ready for your Java?" Joe demanded. He filled a cup and brought the crullers. After that he carried the fish down to one end of the wagon, scaled and cleaned them, and cut each one into six pieces for frying. He took a slate from under the counter, found a piece of chalk after much searching, and wrote with a flourish:

SPECIAL TO-DAY
Fresh Pickerel, 15 Cents

Steve did a little mental arithmetic. Eighteen times fifteen was \$2.70. He had undergone the hardships of the morning, and all he got out of it was a freezing and twenty cents' worth of food. Somebody else was to profit to the extent of two

THE IVY CLUB DISBANDS

dollars and a half. He had a feeling that something was radically wrong with the world.

"I ought to get two more crullers, Joe," he protested.

"Bargain's a bargain," said Joe. "Say," he cried as Steve started for the door, "you know that Gabby Watson, don't you? Well, you tell him to come down here and pay me the fifteen cents he owes me or I'll get after him."

"Go collect your own fifteen cents," Steve told him, and departed. He had thrown off that desperate pinch of cold. The trolley wires were humming, and while he buttoned up his collar the approaching trolley came into sight around a curve. Behind it snow, as fine as powder, swirled high and wide. The car stopped at the weather-beaten shelter, but no passengers alighted. As Steve went down the steps the sound of music came from the lunch-wagon. Cruller Joe was "warbling" again.

"He can afford it," Steve thought bitterly.

Everything about Waterford spoke to him of intense cold. Not a storm door swung open, and shutters were pulled in and bolted. The store windows on Main street were heavily frosted; the ticket-seller's cage at the Opera House was deserted and a sign read: "Pay at the door." Even a Freckles Smith picture could not have drawn a crowd to-day. There were very few people on the streets.

Steve stopped at the butcher shop for his books. The sawdust on the floor was wet from melted snow, and the place was dismally damp. The butcher and the errand boy grinned at him; luckily a customer was waiting and he escaped without the taunting he expected.

By the time he reached home he was once more cold. In fact, he was beginning to get what Mr. Todd called the "shudders." The sun had disappeared and the day had taken on a winter grayness. Tramp heard him as he came toward the kitchen door and set up a shrill barking.

"Steve, dear," Mrs. Benton exclaimed, "why didn't you come home to your dinner? You must be famished."

"I'm not hungry," said Steve.

"I wish you wouldn't eat at that Mr. Todd's," his mother sighed. "Your father says his place is filthy. You'll have to fetch some wood from the Hiding House."

Steve was glad to have the subject of dinner dropped so quickly. Like everything else in Waterford the Hiding House was cold. It had an empty look, like a parlor the morning after a party—vacant, and yet suggestive of those who had been there. The air had the burnt wood smell of last night's fire. He filled his arms with kindling, kicked shut the door, and went back to the house.

THE IVY CLUB DISBANDS

"Steve," said his mother, "you seem to smell of fish."

His heart stood still. He piled the wood in its place and said that he would take Tramp out for a while. The air was too cold for loitering. He whistled to the dog and hastened toward Mr. Todd's. If the fish had rubbed against his clothing he would have to doctor the places with something to take away the odor.

The door of Mr. Todd's shop was closed. He rapped sharply, and after a moment the key was turned in the lock. Followed by Tramp he stepped across the threshold. There stood Gabby, warm and comfortable.

The fat boy assumed an air of bluster. "That's a fine way to treat a fellow. Why didn't you come to the fishing hole?"

Steve gave him a glance of scorn.

Instantly Gabby changed his tactics. To charge that another had not kept to a bargain was an old game of his. If he were right he laid claim to having been himself faithful. If he were wrong—— He knew that this time he was wrong. He adopted an air of dejection.

"I couldn't get away—tried everything, but it was no go. My father stayed home. Maybe I spoke about striking in my sleep. I talk in my sleep sometimes."

"Where was Hub?" Steve demanded.

HIGH BENTON

"Working; he went to work this morning."

Steve suspected that even while Hub had been planning the strike in the Hiding House he had known that he would not be a party to it.

"Was it cold?" Gabby asked.

Without a word Steve walked toward where Mr. Todd sat close to the hot stove.

"Did you catch any fish?"

"Three."

Gabby turned this in his mind. "You ought to give me one. I'd have gone if my father hadn't stayed home."

"You never intended going after you saw Mr. Lane's track in the snow," Steve told him bitterly.

"Gabbie ain't got no spirit," Mr. Todd broke in. "I give you credit, Stevie. Here, now, sit close to the fire."

Gabby lingered for a while, spoke twice about the fish he ought to get, and then departed in a huff. The closed front door made the shop dark, and after his departure it became sleepily quiet. Here and there, through chinks in the stove, Steve could see the glare of the red coals. The heat made him drowsy. He was strangely warm—his head, his body and his hands.

Mr. Todd closed his eyes and dropped his straggly beard on his chest; but his jaws kept working steadily. By this time Tramp had smelled into all the strange corners. He stopped beside Steve's

THE IVY CLUB DISBANDS

chair and the boy brushed his head languidly. The dog patted away. A moment later Mr. Todd roused suddenly and gave a startled gasp.

"Love o' Peter," the old man quavered, "some-thin' cold touched my hand, Stevie. It was just like a ghost, cold and clammy. I felt it."

"I guess it was my dog smelling your hand," said Steve.

The effect upon Mr. Todd was startling. "Dog? Take him away from me, Stevie; take that there dog away. You listen to old 'Lias, Stevie, dogs is bad luck. Call him away." He slid out of the chair and got behind it as though to use it as a barricade. "I didn't see you bring in no dog."

"Why, he would'n bite you, Mr. Todd. He——"

"Take him away, Stevie. I can feel my heart beginnin', I tell you. I'll have a panic, Stevie."

Steve called Tramp and tied him, and the dog sat down patiently to await its freedom. The old man came from behind the chair and resumed his seat. His long, thin neck was tense, his jaws were working rapidly, and the brown tobacco juice was running down his beard in a trickling stream.

"I'm afeard o' dogs," he croaked. "They sees things, Stevie, that it ain't right to be seen. What do they see in the night when they howl? And what happens?" Mr. Todd lowered his voice to a

whisper. "Folks dies, Stevie. You ask anybody what happens when dogs howls at night."

Steve was warmer now—burningly warm—and yet the flesh of his body crept with a quick, cold chill.

"And their eyes shine at night, Stevie, like witches' eyes. I wouldn't let no one give me the best dog in the world; no, sir. To-day you feeds 'em victuals, and to-night they howls for you to be in your cold shroud. Old 'Lias has seen it happen, Stevie."

Steve recovered his composure. Mr. Todd was talking nonsense. He gave a little whistle, and Tramp rapped his stump of a tail against the floor.

"There!" cried Mr. Todd. "What does that sound like? Clods fallin' on a coffin, that's what."

Steve felt his flesh creep again. He arose to go, thought suddenly of the fish smell on his clothing, and had Mr. Todd rub one side of his overcoat with gasolene. Reaching home, he went upstairs to wash without once looking into the pots to see what was cooking for dinner. He felt queer, and his nose was stopped. At the table he ate a mouthful, made a face and pushed his plate away.

"Eating Mr. Todd's cooking in preference to your mother's?" his father asked.

"No, sir. I didn't eat there to-day. I—— Kerchoo!" A sneeze shook his body.

"Humph! You've caught cold. Let me feel

THE IVY CLUB DISBANDS

your head." Mr. Benton reached across the table. "Scott! This boy has a fever, mother. We'd better get him right to bed."

Steve knew that he was sick. His head ached and his bones were sore. His mother brought him a dose of castor oil, and that made him sicker. Presently he found himself in bed with a hot water bottle at his feet, and on the floor a vessel of hot water that gave forth a pungent vapor. The light was turned low, and his mother tip-toed as she went through the hall. By and by the house grew quiet, and from downstairs came a faint, aromatic odor from his father's pipe. He fell asleep.

Sometime in the night he awakened. It seemed hard to breathe, and the bedclothing weighed a ton. Restlessly he tossed from side to side. If he could kick off the covers for a few minutes——

"Ar-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-r-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-r-o-o-o-o-o-o!" came a cry from the out-of-doors.

Steve's heart thumped. A dog was howling under his window. Everything that Mr. Todd had said that day about coffins, and shrouds, and death came back to his mind. A cold sweat broke out on his body.

"Ar-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-r-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-r-o-o-o-o-o-o!" The cry rose and fell in high, mournful notes.

Steve shook and shivered in terror. It seemed to him that he had known of cases where people

died after the howling of a dog. He heard a sound—his father's voice.

"Confound it! If I don't let that dog in he'll howl all night."

His father went slop-slopping downstairs in slippered feet. His mother stole into his room, and patted his pillow, and smoothed the bed covers, and felt his forehead. He wanted to ask her if sick people died when dogs howled; but now he was ashamed of his fears. Downstairs a door was opened, and the howling stopped. His father came upstairs grumbling sleepily. The house once more settled into its quiet. He lay there a prey to his imagination—now thinking he heard a dog howling, now hearing the echo of Mr. Todd's awe-struck voice. He wondered if he was sicker. Just before daybreak weariness closed his eyes. He slept until voices awakened him.

"His fever seems higher," said his mother. "He's wheezing."

"I'll call Dr. Birch," said his father. "I'll stay home until I see what the doctor says."

Steve broke into another cold sweat. He was worse then. Maybe Mr. Todd was right.

It seemed hours before the doctor came. He was a tall man, a skin-and-bones sort of man; and his skin, the color of a pale coffee bean, was stretched tight over the bones. He was a slow man, too—slow in his actions and slow in his talk. He

THE IVY CLUB DISBANDS

searched through three or four pockets before he found his clinical thermometer. Then he hemmed and hawed, stuck the thermometer in Steve's mouth, and felt his pulse. After a minute he took the thermometer out.

"H'm!" he said wisely. His "lung-sounder," as Steve called it, seemed to have disappeared. He couldn't find it in his coat pocket, nor was it in his overcoat. Finally it bobbed up in one of his hip pockets. He pulled down the bed-covers and proceeded to listen to Steve's chest.

Mr. Benton stood at the foot of the bed. "How is he, Doctor?"

"Well, now, Mr. Benton, I'll tell you. It seems to me—h'm—that he has just about—h'm—escaped pneumonia."

"Is there any danger?"

Steve held his breath.

"Well, now, Mr. Benton, I'll tell you. I should say that a good rest—h'm—of about four or five days—h'm—should fix him up." The doctor bent his tall, bony body and proceeded to write two prescriptions, holding a pad on one knee. He read them slowly, read them again, and prepared to go.

"You're forgetting your satchel, Doctor," said Mr. Benton.

"H'm. Yes. Thank you."

While Dr. Birch was on his way downstairs Mrs. Benton came into the room. "Oh, Doctor," she

called; "you are forgetting your stethoscope." She picked the "lung-sounder" from the bed and hurried out with it.

"H'm. Yes. Thank you. Well, now, Mr. Benton, I'll tell you. Just a few days' rest—h'm—and the medicine—h'm—and he'll be himself again."

"You're forgetting your satchel again, Doctor," said Mr. Benton.

"H'm. Yes. So I am. Thank you," and then the doctor was gone.

Steve gave a great sigh of relief. So he wasn't going to die, after all, even if a dog had howled under his window. He snuggled into his pillow; and when his mother came upstairs with a breakfast tray he was fast asleep.

Two days later he was sitting up, able to call downstairs for a second helping of custard. His father brought up the dish and sat beside the bed. Steve saw at once that something was wrong. His father had taken off his glasses and was holding them grimly by one lens, and that was always a sign that trouble was brewing.

"I heard on the train to-night that the high school heating system froze, and that instead of the school being dismissed it was kept in session one hour. Is that right?"

"Y—yes, sir." Steve lost all interest in the custard.

"That's where you got your cold. It might just

THE IVY CLUB DISBANDS

as well have been pneumonia. I'm going to telephone to Mr. Tarkan about this."

Steve was dumb. His day of truancy was leading to all manner of disaster. If his father telephoned to Mr. Tarkan, an investigation would show that he had not been at school that day. If his father protested, and then had the truth flung in his face——

Mr. Benton was already halfway down the stairs.

"Dad!" Steve called weakly.

Mr. Benton paused. "Yes?"

"I wasn't at school that day."

"Where were you?"

"I was fishing for pickerel through the ice."

Mr. Benton came back to the room. Steve kept his eyes down and pulled nervously at the fringe of the top blanket. He couldn't see his father's face, but he could see the hand that held the eyeglasses. The fingers looked as though they were going to snap the lens.

"How often has this happened?" his father asked at last.

"That was the first time, sir."

"Why did you do it, particularly on a day so cold? Did you have an idea you were an Eskimo?"

In stumbling speech Steve told the story of the Ivy Club, and of Hub Morgan's expulsion from

HIGH BENTON

school, and of the strike that was planned to force his reinstatement.

"How about this Morgan boy and this Gabby?" Mr. Benton asked. "Did they keep the appointment and go out on the ice?"

"No, sir."

"I thought not. Was that the Ivy Club in session the night I looked into the Hiding House?"

"Yes, sir."

"A fine pair of bandits," Mr. Benton commented. "That Morgan boy looks like a trouble-hunter, and Gabby looks too lazy to clean himself. Does anybody else know you played truant?"

"Mr. Lane does." Steve plucked at the fringe again. "He saw me when I came in from the ice."

Mr. Benton began to tap the glasses against the palm of the other hand. Suddenly he walked out of the room and went downstairs. Steve heard him putting on his overcoat. The street door closed and he was gone.

"Mom," Steve called, "where did dad go?"

"To Mr. Lane's." His mother came upstairs. "Steve, dear, what will he be told about you now? You foolish boy!"

Steve did not know. At last his father came back, but did not come upstairs; and after a few minutes he caught the faint aroma of the pipe. Evidently the subject was not to be brought up

THE IVY CLUB DISBANDS

again to-night. He lay back on his pillow and felt little, and mean, and cheap.

Friday the Waterford *Sentinel* announced to the town that "Stephen Benton, son of Mr. and Mrs. John Benton, is reported among the sick." That night the doorbell rang. Steve, reading in bed, wondered who the visitor might be. His mother opened the door.

"'Evenin', Mrs. Benton," said Elias Todd's voice. "I heard that Stevie was sick-a-bed."

"Why, yes, Mr. Todd." His mother's voice sounded undecided, as though she were not sure how she should receive this man. His father came out into the hall.

"'Evenin', Mr. Benton," said the Jitney Man. The voice became blurred. Presently Steve heard footsteps on the stairs. His door was pushed open.

"Steve," his father said dryly, "here's a visitor for you."

Mr. Todd advanced into the room. He had donned a collar, but had forgotten to wear a tie. The front of the collar was soiled with the marks of fingers as though he had put it on before washing his hands.

"You don't look a mite sick, Stevie," he said genially. "I was worried about you. Old 'Lias warned you about that there dog."

"What's that?" Mr. Benton asked sharply.

HIGH BENTON

"I was tellin' Stevie, Mr. Benton, how folks dies when dogs howls at night."

"Oh!" Mr. Benton looked at the boy as though struck by a humorous thought and began to laugh.

"Eh?" Mr. Todd looked blankly from one to the other. "I brung you somethin', Stevie. Lemon drops is mighty good for colds; ask anybody. Five for a cent, they was, and I bought ten cents' worth." He took a bag from his pocket and counted twenty candies out on the bed. "Have two, Mr. Benton? No? Well, if Mrs. Benton would like for to have two——"

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Todd. Thank you, though," and Mr. Benton withdrew from the room.

The Jitney Man listened until the footsteps had grown faint downstairs. He drew close to the bed and lowered his voice to a whisper.

"I brung you something else, Stevie." He opened his hand. In it lay a small reddish stone. "That there is a charm. I bought it off a gypsy lady five years ago. Guaranteed to keep away sickness and bad luck. I'll lend it to you, Stevie, but mind you give it back to old 'Lias the minute you get out-o'-doors. I've been carryin' that stone for five years and I ain't had a sickness except the rheumatics and I got them fightin' for the Union."

Steve reached for the stone.

"No! no! You must take hold o' it in your right

THE IVY CLUB DISBANDS

hand. The gypsy lady said how left hands break the charm."

This time Steve took the stone with due regard for the ceremony. Personally he thought it looked uncommonly like a piece of common sandstone.

"You won't forget about your left hand, will you, Stevie?" the old man asked anxiously. "That there stone came from the tomb o' an Igyptian mummy. You put that under your pillow, Stevie, and old 'Lias says you'll get up to-morrow."

Sure enough, Steve came downstairs next day, and watched what he could see of Waterford from the parlor window. The weather was milder. The trees along the street seemed to bend a warmer shadow on the houses. The snow was melting, and from roof corners and tree branches there was a steady drip, drip, drip of water. It was Saturday, matinée day at the Opera House, with eight reels of pictures for ten cents.

"Can I go out this afternoon, mom?" Steve called.

"Not to-day, Steve. Your father said not until Monday."

However, time did not hang heavily on his hands. During the afternoon he found a tin of bronzing powder and touched up the parlor and dining-room radiators. Just to add variety to the job he also bronzed the tip of Tramp's stumpy tail. In the evening he brought out his father's tobacco jar and

HIGH BENTON

the checker board, and succeeded in winning two games out of five. His truancy had not been referred to since the night he had confessed. He wondered what Mr. Lane had said.

Sunday was always a drowsy day in Waterford. There was an hour to go to church, an hour to come home—and after that one quiet hour after another. Usually, with dinner over, Mr. Benton read a while and then took a nap. Even Tramp seemed to sense a different sort of day and was content to curl up in a warm corner and view his world from time to time with sleepy eyes.

After dinner Steve suddenly remembered that he had left Mr. Todd's charm on his bureau, and ran upstairs to store it safely in his pocket. The sound of voices reached his ears. He parted the curtains of his window and gave a violent start. Gabby and Hub, walking hesitatingly, had turned in from the sidewalk and were coming toward the house.

Before Steve could reach the stairs the bell rang. His father answered the summons holding under one arm the newspaper he had been reading.

"Can we see Steve?" Hub asked from the porch.

"Hullo, Mr. Benton," said Gabby.

"Why, I suppose you can, boys. Steve!"

Steve came downstairs. Under his father's eyes he found this an embarrassing meeting. He led them into the parlor, and his father went back to a chair in the dining-room. But the door between

THE IVY CLUB DISBANDS

the two rooms was open, and Steve was sure that his father, while apparently buried in his newspaper, was in reality keeping a sharp watch on the visitors.

"Coming back to school Monday?" Gabby asked. He, too, seemed to suspect that open door, and sat stiffly and uncomfortably on the edge of his chair.

Steve said he was. Hub, grinning at Gabby's uneasiness, announced that he had earned eight dollars during his first week at work.

"I guess that isn't bad," he boasted.

Steve thought eight dollars was very good. Gabby, stealing furtive glances toward the dining-room, spoke out of the side of his mouth.

"Does your father know?"

Steve nodded.

"You didn't tell him that we——"

Mr. Benton rattled his newspaper and coughed. Gabby drew back quickly on his chair. Conversation seemed to die. Before long Hub said he guessed he'd better go. Gabby stood up with him.

Mr. Benton stood up, too. He walked to the hall ahead of the visitors and held open the door for them. Something told Steve to remain behind.

"Boys," Mr. Benton said, "there is no longer an Ivy Club. I have taken the trouble to disband it. There will be no more meetings at the Hiding House. Is that clear?"

HIGH BENTON

Steve could fancy Hub smiling broadly at the news.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Benton," Gabby hastened to say.

"You'll do me a favor, both you boys, if you'll stay away from here. If you want to meet Steve, stay away from here. Good-afternoon."

The door closed. Steve saw them go down the walk toward the street, Hub walking leisurely and Gabby hurrying as though glad to be away from this sudden onslaught. Then his father's step sounded in the room and he turned.

Mr. Benton was holding his eyeglasses firmly by one lens. "And now, young man," he said, "I think you are well enough to hear some news. You may never lead your class, and I don't know as I expect it of you. But you are going to study. Hereafter you are going to do your work."

CHAPTER VII

DIVIDING PATHS

MONDAY Steve went back to school. Over toward Smoky Hollow the haze from the plants seemed to tell of a busy world that had gone about its business while he had been locked in the house. From the north came a clean wind that bore the mysterious smell of the woods on the other side of the county road. Shutters were open again, and the sun sparkled on polished window glass and seemed to wish him a pleasant good-morning. This was Waterford—home.

No place else, Steve thought, did the sky seem so fair above the housetops. He could have closed his eyes and sniffed, and have known this for his own town. For there was something in the very air, something in the very feel of things, that spoke to him of Snake river, and of Smoky Hollow Hill, and of the abandoned wagon road and the Hiding House.

Mr. Todd was waiting for him a block from the school. "You ain't lost it, Stevie, has you?" he asked anxiously.

HIGH BENTON

Steve reached for the stone.

"Not in your left pocket, Stevie?"

"No," said Steve, "I remembered about my right hand."

Mr. Todd's long, bony fingers caressed the stone lovingly. "Didn't it make you better? Didn't it, now? Folks what says there ain't no such thing as charms is fools. Old 'Lias knows; yes, sir."

The ground in front of the school was muddy from much scurrying and tramping of feet. The students had evidently made a practice of scraping their shoes on the steps, for on each tread the wet clay lay thick. Steve scraped his own shoes, and went indoors.

Mr. Lane stood near the entrance to his office. The days of intense cold must have dealt sharply with him; his face was thinner and his eyes seemed to have sunk deeper into his head. He was pale, deadly pale; and yet to-day the lines of pain were gone. He limped forward, and Steve's heart gave a throb. He had still to face the music for his day of truancy.

"Better, Stephen?" the principal asked kindly.

"Yes, sir."

"It's good to see you back. If you need any help to catch up with your class come to me."

The interview was over. As Steve walked toward the cloak-room a sense of intuition told him that his truancy was a closed book. Mr. Lane did

DIVIDING PATHS

not intend to refer to it. With a feeling of relief he ran upstairs to join his class. Will Adams overtook him in the upper hall.

"How goes it, Steve? All right? I'll lend you any of my note-books if you need them."

His experiences with his teachers that day were varied. Mr. Frost met him at the door as he entered the classroom, gave him a warm smile of welcome, and walked with him all the way to his seat demanding quizzically how he liked entertaining coryza germs—it wasn't until later that Steve found that coryza meant nothing more than a cold. Mr. Frost also offered to give him an hour two afternoons that week if he wanted to go over the ground that had been covered while he had been away, but Steve made no promises. Mr. Archer said "Good-morning, good-morning," and gave abstracted study to his wing tie. Mr. Garfunkel looked at him absently and said, "It seems I have not seen you for a few days, Benton," and forgot all about him. Miss Cooper came to his desk before her period started.

"Are you sure you are yourself again?" she asked. "Be careful not to overdo for a few days."

"I—I'm all right," Steve stammered, abashed by her unlooked-for sympathy. While he had been away Stevenson and his donkey had traveled as far as the monastery of Our Lady of the Snows. To his astonishment to-day's period was filled with

absorbing interest. Heretofore Stevenson had been to him a vague author who had written some bully stories. Now Stevenson suddenly became a flesh-and-blood man of whimsical turns of mind, of sympathetic heart and of gentle consideration. As he packed his books at the end of the day he was half inclined to take a "Life of Stevenson" from the school library.

"I'm going down to Mr. Todd's," said Gabby. "Coming?"

Steve shook his head. Gabby scraped the side of one shoe back and forth along the edge of a step.

"Say, can't we sneak around to the Hiding House sometimes when your father isn't home?"

Steve shook his head again. Gabby gave up scraping the shoe and buttoned his overcoat.

"You ought to have heard what Hub said about your father," he grinned wickedly, and shambled off. The books under his arms were on a par with his own appearance. Pages had been pulled out and stuck back unevenly, and the edges had a ragged, slovenly look.

At home Steve found the wood-box empty and went down to the Hiding House. Everything smelled musty and dead as though the doors had been closed for a long time. He gathered his kindling and looked about him. **The** ashes of the last fire of the Ivy Club were cold on the hearth.

DIVIDING PATHS

Hub and Gabby would sit there no more. Neither would he—not at night, anyway—for the Hiding House was spooky after dark. He closed the door and braced it, and lugged his load across the road. It would be summer again before the Hiding House would be the old fascinating place of tools, and oars, and forgotten odds and ends, and cobwebs, and warm, sunlit corners.

That night, after his lessons were done, he would have liked a game of checkers, but his father had gone off somewhere with Mr. Tarkan. He suspected that the visit had something to do with the fight on Congressman Shields. He yawned, and fidgeted, and finally went up to bed. He lay there for a long time listening to the soft creak-creak of his mother's rocker as she sewed. All at once from the sidewalk came a new sound: the tap of a cane, a firm step, silence, the tap of a cane again and a step. Mr. Lane was carrying his restless body through the streets of Waterford. He listened until the sound grew faint in the distance.

Next morning Gabby was waiting for him with news. "Do you know who's working with Hub Morgan in Mr. O'Brien's machine shop? Gregor Helsing's father. Hub says he's a nut."

Steve was only mildly interested in this revelation.

"Gregor's father thinks he's an inventor." Gabby laughed loudly. "He was trying to do some-

thing with a machine, and they had a demonstration, and zingo! the whole machine busted. A piece hit Mr. O'Brien in the face. Hub said you should have heard him. He told Gregor's father that if he ever again bothered him about inventions he'd fire him. Gregor's father can't speak much English. Mr. O'Brien called him an old fool."

Steve didn't see anything to laugh at. Mr. Hel-sing, a patient, plodding man, had been pointed out to him on the street. And so he was an inventor! The mechanical side of Steve's nature responded to that. He knew from his readings of the bitter struggles inventors sometimes have. Even in Waterford things were happening under people's noses and they were none the wiser.

After school he met Gregor. The boy gave him one of those friendly, quiet smiles. "How's everything, Steve? I wanted to come and see you."

"Why didn't you?"

"I was at Mr. Todd's getting some engine parts for my father. I met your father as I came out. I imagine he didn't want me to come."

Steve was thunderstruck. "My father can't have anything against you."

"Maybe I was mistaken," Gregor said quickly. "How's the club?"

"There isn't any more Ivy Club," Steve answered. Gregor gave him a questioning look, but

DIVIDING PATHS

he made no explanation. That night, after supper, he said to his father:

"Did you tell Gregor Helsing he couldn't come to see me?"

"Gregor Helsing? Who's Gregor Helsing?"

"A high school student. He lives at Smoky Hollow. He was coming out of Mr. Todd's——"

"Oh, yes." Mr. Benton filled his pipe deliberately. "I didn't tell him he *couldn't* come."

"But, dad, he isn't like Gabby or Hub."

"No? He seems to make a hang-out of the same places."

Steve retired to his books. Why was everybody so down on Mr. Todd? Why had he rushed so swiftly to Gregor's defense? He and Gregor had never been real friends. The statement that Gregor was not like Gabby or Hub had come spontaneously from his lips. While he pondered this, Tramp's head rested on his knee. His father said you could trust a dog—and Tramp liked Gregor. He stared off into space thinking, and presently roused himself and returned to his books.

For perhaps a month he was a model for all the boys in Waterford. He was not above banging an icy snowball against the bell on top of the fire-house, and sometimes he took dangerous chances with his sled on Smoky Hollow Hill. But he came home each afternoon in plenty of time to do his chores, and in the evenings he littered the dining-

HIGH BENTON

room table with school-books and papers. There came a night when he upset a bottle of ink, and some of the ink ran down over Tramp's head. Thereafter he worked in the kitchen.

He always knew when Mr. Tarkan came to discuss politics, for at such times he was sent upstairs. Nevertheless, he sensed that Congressman Shields was too strong in his own party to be beaten for a renomination, and that a plan was now on foot to name Mr. Kerrigan as an independent candidate. Each day letters came to his father from all parts of the county—from Rivermouth, from Standing Rock, and from far-off Franklin Furnace. He wished with all his heart that they would let him listen while they talked. Once Mr. Tarkan came to the house with six other men, and the conference lasted until far into the night. The noise the visitors made leaving the house, their voices and the creaking tread of their feet on the frozen porch, awakened him in his front bedroom; and soon afterwards he heard the clock in the lower hall strike three times. What strategy of government, he wondered, had held the gathering together until that hour?

By degrees, as the weeks passed, that wretched day on Snake river faded from his mind. He studied a little less; he played a little more. The Jitney Man's place with all its dirt and confusion once more became familiar ground.

DIVIDING PATHS

"It's about time you came back," Gabby said scornfully. "Hub says your father must think you are a little saint."

"You let Stevie be," Mr. Todd remonstrated. "A boy must stand by his pop even if his pop don't know no better."

"You wouldn't catch my father being afraid to let the wind blow on me," Gabby continued.

"Some pops has sense and some pops ain't," said Mr. Todd. "Some pops realizes a boy has rights, and some pops don't care. My pop he was forever a-lickin' tar out o' me, so one day I ups and runs away and hides out in the woods. We was all woods around Waterford then. When I went home pop he says to tear away for myself and come to a bad end." Mr. Todd gave a feeble chuckle. "I fooled 'em all. Here I am with a business o' my own."

Steve looked around the shop at the business.

"Did your brother Aaron tear away, too?" Gabby asked.

The old man glared. "Ain't I always been a-tellin' you Aaron was always puttin' on airs and carryin' himself high? And what come o' it? Did he try to get old 'Lias to lodge him?"

Gabby nodded.

Mr. Todd chuckled again. "Just try runnin' away, Stevie, and hidin' out."

HIGH BENTON

"I don't have to run from my father," Steve said indignantly.

"O' course, o' course, Stevie. We was just speakin' generally. Old 'Lias ain't one to make trouble between a boy and his pop."

The winter wore away. At the high school the specified work of the year was finished, and the time remaining before examinations was given over to review. Steve lost interest entirely. All out-of-doors was calling him. The days were balmy, the ice was running out of Snake river, and in the front yards of Waterford hyacinths and tulips and narcissus were pushing their green heads up through the soft earth. North of the county road the woods were in early bloom, and the scent blew over the town. Men were busy with pots and brushes repainting the trim of their houses. The street crossings were taking on their spring season of mud, and at the school planks had been brought up from the basement and left in the vestibule against the day when they would be stretched from the third tread of the outdoor steps to solid, dry ground. As long as Steve could remember the spring rains had always formed a lake in front of the high school steps.

The school baseball candidates had begun to throw a ball around, but Steve had no desire to play. He had brought home his boat in the fall, and it needed calking and a fresh coat of paint.

DIVIDING PATHS

One of his oar locks was loose. He wanted to overhaul his lines and his hooks and to mend his crabbing net. These things lay closer to his heart than baseball.

He began to spend his afternoons at the Hiding House. It was a new Hiding House entirely, no longer chill, no longer bleak, but filled with a great magic. He could leave the old-fashioned oak doors open and work in the sunshine. The far corners were brighter and friendlier, and the thick cobwebs turned softly mysterious where the direct rays of light touched them. Strange smells of the Long Ago seemed to arise from the timbers, and even the bullet holes lost some of their sinister suggestion. Once, as Steve stuffed the seams of the boat, Gabby whistled cautiously from down the wagon road where the dandelions were already in bloom. Tramp, lying in front of the open doors, pricked up his ears and growled, but Steve gave no sign that he had heard.

The day came when the boat was ready. It was Saturday, and Steve needed some one to help him carry it to the water. He went to Mr. Todd's in the hope of finding Gabby. The fat boy was there leaning lazily in the doorway.

"Gee, Steve, I'd like to help you, but I'm minding the shop for Mr. Todd," he said.

"How about when he comes back?"

HIGH BENTON

"I've got to go home and—and clean out the cellar."

"That won't take all day. How about this afternoon?"

Gabby sighed. "I've got an awful headache. You wouldn't ask me if you knew how sick I am. It's a pretty heavy boat, isn't it?"

"You mean you don't want to help," said Steve. Mr. Todd's ancient automobile came wheezing up the road and panted its weary way into the shop. Gabby made no move to go home and clean out the cellar.

Steve walked off. There was no use going back to the Hiding House; he would only stare in disappointment at the boat. He went toward the river, and came at length to the knoll of ground that overlooked the river and the town. Down among the reeds where he kept his boat the shoulders of a boy were bent over some task. He hurried toward the water, and was still some distance off when the bent back straightened. Gregor Helsing stood erect.

"Hello, Steve," he called. "I've been monkeying with two wrenches, but one keeps slipping. Could you hold one for me?"

Steve saw that Mr. Lane's motor boat was in the narrow inlet where he kept his own skiff, and that Gregor was overhauling the engine. He held one

DIVIDING PATHS

wrench while Gregor manipulated the other. Presently the job was done.

"That's over," Gregor sighed. "What brought you down here, Steve?"

"I wanted to get my boat over."

"To-day?"

"N—no; Gabby can't help me."

Gregor stepped out of the boat. "Want to do it now? I can give you a hand."

"Will you?" The gloom fell from Steve's face. He led the way back through the meadow reeds toward the houses, the trees, the roads and the hedges that were Waterford.

At the Hiding House Gregor paused to look around. "This would make a fine workshop," he said, and lifted one end of the boat. They carried it down the wagon road. Once clear of the trees their progress was rapid. Steve's arms began to ache, but he was ashamed to ask for a rest. By and by they came to the knoll.

"Better stop a moment," Gregor said. He lowered his own end easily. Steve's end almost fell as his cramped muscles relaxed. Gregor said nothing; but when they began to descend the slope he contrived to place himself so that he had the greater share of the load. In this fashion they came to the inlet.

"Bow toward the north," said Gregor.

"Can't," said Steve. "The inlet isn't wide enough."

"But Elias Todd said a bow to the north launching means good luck."

"Bosh!" said Steve. They lowered gently. The keel touched. A ripple ran along the water.

"Better not tell Mr. Todd she was launched east and west," Gregor laughed.

"Bosh!" Steve said again. Half way home he suddenly changed his course and walked toward the Jitney Man's. Mr. Todd was asleep in a chair tilted against the wall. Gabby was singing to himself and whittling a stick.

"I thought you had a headache," Steve said bitterly. His voice awoke the old man.

"It got better," Gabby explained. "Is the boat launched?"

"Yes."

"Can we go for a ride Saturday?"

Steve gave him a look.

"Gee! I was just telling Mr. Todd I hoped you'd come back so I could help you. Wasn't I, Mr. Todd?"

The old man ran his hands through his whiskers as though trying to recall a past conversation.

"Well, now, maybe you was, Gabbie; maybe you was. Old 'Lias's ears ain't what they was."

Chagrined and cheap, Gabby resumed his whittling.

DIVIDING PATHS

For five days Steve stayed away from the Jitney Man's. Gabby's selfishness filled him with disgust. He was also beginning to see the cheapness and the hollowness and the fraud of Mr. Todd's way of living. But his fit of repugnance soon passed. By the following Saturday he relented, and Gabby went with him on a trip up Snake river. The tide was flowing out, and after the fashion of Snake river in the spring the bosom of the stream was thickly dotted with winter wreckage washed down from the headwaters among the hills. For a while they tried their hands at fishing, but the fish were too small to be of any account. They wound up their lines, pulled in the anchor, and let the boat drift, poling out from the flats now and then when they got too close in shore. The sound of a woodman's ax echoed over the water. They knew that Gregor and Mr. Lane were on the river, but though they heard the faint exhaust of an engine the motor boat did not come in sight around any of the bends.

"Do you know what Mr. Todd says?" Gabby demanded.

Steve shook his head.

"Mr. Todd says for all we know Mr. Lane may have done something, and the police may be looking for him, and he's just hiding out in a little town like Waterford. Mr. Todd once knew a man who limped like that because he had been shot by a policeman."

Steve gave a sniff.

"Gee!" said Gabby, "how we love our teacher," and Steve flushed and ran out the oars.

The spring became more fragrant. Along the river, all at once, the marsh reeds grew rich and rank. All Waterford began to plant its gardens, and trim its lawns, and look to its summer awnings and screens. Here and there an impatient small boy put his bare feet on the ground; and down by the trolley bridge older boys, naked and shivering, plunged overboard, Spartan-like, for the first swim of the year. Almost before Steve knew it the calendar said "June!" and examinations were on.

He lived a week of sudden fright. Mr. Frost's eyes seemed to say to him, "Ah, my boy, why didn't you stick a little closer to your tasks?" When the agony was at last over, he and Gabby wandered to Mr. Todd's as though to a haven. Here, at least, they would find sympathy. The old man had a "hankerin'," and smacked his lips and spoke of griddle cakes "brown and tasty, Gabbie, and just sloppin' in 'lasses." Gabby went off with a jug to buy the sweet, and Steve began to mix the batter in a cracked, yellow bowl that smelled of fish. Gabby, when the last cake was gone, complained bitterly of questions that had appeared in the examinations.

Instantly the old man was alert. "Was they tryin' to fox you?"

DIVIDING PATHS

"You think they'll ask you questions on one thing," said Gabby, "and you look that up and they ask about something else."

"Didn't I tell you?" Mr. Todd demanded triumphantly. "Ain't that how they abuses and cheats a boy? What's examinations for, to find out what you know or to find out what you don't know?"

"To find out what you know, of course."

"Then why don't they ask questions what a boy can answer? If you was to come to us, Gabbie, and ask for a job, would I ask was you handy with tools or would I want to know what was the capital o' Boston?"

"Cities don't have capitals," Gabby said.

The old man looked at him suspiciously. "Maybe the g'ographies has been changed since old 'Lias was a boy. I seen some place where the map is always changin'. What's the sense o' teachin' g'ography to-day what won't be g'ography to-morrow? What for? Just to make soft jobs for g'ography teachers."

Three days later the results were announced. Will Adams led the class with a percentage of 94. Steve had squeezed through with a mark of 72. Gabby had stopped just short of passing with 69.

Steve took his report home, and the nearer he came to the house the less joy he found in the figures. Mr. Benton studied them in silence.

"Steve," he said at last, "you'll never get any

HIGH BENTON

place just hanging on. You'll have to climb. Do you see much of that Gabby boy?"

"Well—sometimes."

"That helps to account for the 72. Old Todd accounts for it, too, I suppose. A precious pair, that Gabby boy and Todd."

Steve stole away to the Hiding House. There Tramp found him in silent misery. The dog, seeming to understand, came close and licked his hands.

"You better watch out," Steve gulped, "or they'll be saying I ought not talk to you."

Tramp's head nestled into his lap.

Within a day the black mood passed. The graduating class gave a party, and in high spirits he went off to enjoy the evening. It became apparent at once that this was not the type of party to which he was accustomed. There were none of the customary games, no boisterous singing around a piano, no peeping in through a crack in a folding door to see what good things graced the supper table. The girls sat around the room stiffly starched, and the boys gathered in the hall and in the parlor doorway flushed and much given to mopping their faces. Two of the older boys wore evening clothes to the awe of the others and somewhat to their own awe, too. Somebody began to play the piano, and the boys crossed to where the girls were sitting.

"Do you dance, Steve?" Will Adams asked.

"No," said Steve. In a moment the parlor was

DIVIDING PATHS

filed with dancing couples. Steve and a handful of others stood neglected and alone.

"This is a frost of a party," said Gabby. "Where do we come in?"

"Do you expect everybody to stop dancing because we can't dance?" Will asked.

At the end of an hour Steve got his hat and coat, waited until the hall was temporarily clear, and departed into the night.

"Hello," said his father when he reached home. "Why so soon?"

"Is—is it hard to learn to dance?" Steve asked.

"Ah!" said his father; "now we have it." He pushed the table against the wall. "Now, mother, give the young man his first lesson. What were the dance tunes in our day? I'll try to whistle one."

"Can you dance, dad?" Steve asked in surprise.

"Well," Mr. Benton answered dryly, "I used to think so. Did you try it to-night?"

Steve shook his head.

"Lucky boy! But probably the girls to-day are not as snappy as they used to be. I remember dancing with a girl years ago and because I stepped on her toes she slapped me."

"Don't you believe him, Steve," Mrs. Benton smiled. "He's fibbing about me."

Steve's eyes opened. Why, his father had probably stood around in hallways just as he had done

HIGH BENTON

to-night. There was an element of companionship in the thought; they had each had their time of social isolation. His father began to whistle an old tune, and his mother reached for his hand.

Ten minutes later the first lesson was over. He had previously accepted his legs as natural parts of his body, no different than anybody else's legs, but now he knew they were the most awkward legs in the world. He glanced down at them in consternation.

"Steve," said his father, "you are worse than I was."

"I didn't step on mom's toes," Steve said defensively, and his father exploded into laughter.

The Hiding House saw very little of him that summer. Hub Morgan was working, Gabby was forbidden the place, and much of the enchantment was gone now that he had to find his pleasures there alone. In the main he spent his days on the river. He contrived a mast and a leg-of-mutton sail, and on more than one occasion only the stolid sluggishness of his flat-bottom skiff saved him from being upset into Snake river. Tramp never quite grew used to the sail, and always gave voice to frenzied barks when it swung around. In time Steve mastered the knack of tacking, and learned just what patches of high ground killed the wind when it blew from east or west. Then one day he tried to sail under the trolley bridge not knowing that his

DIVIDING PATHS

mast was too high. There was a shudder through the boat, a crack and a crash, and the mast lay in ruins. Tramp went overboard with the wreckage, and swam frantically for shore. He found bottom, scrambled up among the reeds, shook himself, and dashed for home without once looking back. Later, when Steve came forlornly up the old wagon road carrying all that was left of the mast, the dog, as though conscious of the crime of his desertion, met him with cringing steps and pleading eyes.

The Jitney Man's saw a fair share of Steve that summer. It was a hot summer, and two Italian trackmen, working along the railroad, were overcome by the heat and carried up to Mr. Simpson's drug-store. Immediately, from some obscure place, Mr. Todd rooted out a battered water cooler, and Steve and Gregor scrubbed its insides for hours before it was pronounced fit to do duty. Thereafter it always held a cold, refreshing liquor—sometimes lemonade but most often oatmeal water.

"Good as medicine," Mr. Todd said wisely. "Lemon juice is fine for to kill bugs in your stomach. You drink oatmeal water and you won't never have no colic. True as Gospel, Stevie; ask any doctor."

Gregor had come to work in the shop for his second summer. He had swept out the dark corners, and had washed the rear windows and the transom over the front door so that the sunlight, a stranger

HIGH BENTON

all through the winter, might enter. The nuts, bolts and screws had again been gathered from the floor and sorted—and this time Gabby did not make the mistake of scattering them. In fact, whenever Gregor was about, Gabby stepped very gently. He still cooked on the rickety gas stove with the brick under one corner, but he was careful not to slop the floor.

“Gee!” he complained to Steve, “this isn’t Mr. Todd’s shop any more. Why doesn’t Gregor put his own name over the door?”

“I don’t hear Mr. Todd objecting,” said Steve.

The old man, after one feeble protest, had accepted his fate. He even consented to throw his tobacco cuds into the street instead of dropping them on the floor. And as Gregor’s capable hands began to make short work of the jobs, he took to tilting his chair against the wall in the cool shade and snoring away the afternoons. Occasionally, after train time, when the life of Waterford flowed past his door in a spasmodic flood, he would open his eyes, survey the road drowsily, shift his chew of tobacco into a fresh position and drop off into another doze.

Little by little, as the summer passed, a strong bond of friendship developed between Steve and the quiet boy from Smoky Hollow. Occasionally, when Steve was at the shop in the afternoon, they spoke of many things while Mr. Todd snored; but

DIVIDING PATHS

always Gregor's thoughts seemed to turn to the day last fall when they had gone to Rivermouth and had watched the ships in the river from the hill. To Gregor, ships represented the wonder and the movement and the color of commerce. Mills and factories and shops might make things, but steam cars and ships carried them to the far places of the earth.

"I want to handle things," he said to Steve, "and send them to the strange corners of the earth. When you send into a wild country the goods that civilized persons use, you immediately begin to civilize that country. Did you ever think of that, Steve?"

Steve shook his head.

"The man who just does the thing that he's paid to do," Gregor said dreamily, "and never looks beyond it, and never asks what it's all for and what it all accomplishes—he's just a machine. Suppose Watt hadn't watched a water kettle. We might not have steam engines to-day. It's the man who puts brains into his work who gets ahead. Soon he gets a bigger job, and has his finger on the buying and the selling and the solving of problems; but the fellow who drifts through his job from day to day stays at the same job. Commerce, Steve, is the greatest game in the world. You have the whole earth before you—'Asia, and Africa, and Europe—

just as the butcher here has the streets of Waterford before him."

Gabby had wandered in during the discussion. When Gregor went down to the front of the shop for a bolt, he giggled and tapped his knuckles against his head.

"Vacant," he said. "Nobody home."

Steve got up abruptly and walked outside. Again, just as on the day when they had watched the ships from the Rivermouth hill, Gregor had said something that he did not quite understand; but Gabby's snickering derision struck a jarring note. The more he saw of Gregor the less he liked Gabby.

He was filled with another sudden revulsion. He sickened of this disordered shop where he had passed so many idle afternoons. Mr. Todd's revolutionary ideas had once charmed him by their boldness, but now he was beginning to see that Mr. Todd's thoughts were the thoughts of a lazy, ignorant man. He longed wistfully for more friends like Gregor, or like Will Adams. Will lived over at the other end of Waterford, and it was difficult to be chummy with a boy who was not of his neighborhood. For many days he tried to find new channels of amusement, but Waterford was small and its opportunities, even for friendships, were limited. At last his boy's soul cried aloud for companionship, and slowly he retraced his steps and turned his face once more toward the Jitney Man's.

DIVIDING PATHS

The day was still and hot, and the baked dust lay thick in the roads. A dog, panting, had crept close to the shade of the shop's front wall. In spite of the heat the double doors were closed. Steve let himself in and threw one door wide.

"Close it, Stevie!" Mr. Todd cried in a panic. "Quick!"

Steve closed the door. Gregor was not in the shop. The old man, agitated, was pacing back and forth.

"Did you see him out there, Stevie?" he demanded.

"See what?"

"The dog. Didn't you see him breathin'? It's hydrophoby weather, Stevie. He's goin' mad sure's you're born."

Steve laughed.

"I'm tellin' you," the old man insisted earnestly. "Ain't I been a-watchin' him for an hour? No good ever come o' havin' dogs around." The thin, wavering voice grew wheedling. "Has you time to do old 'Lias a favor?"

Steve nodded.

"Would you go down to Greggie's house? Greggie wanted for to have the afternoon off and took the key. I'm feared o' that dog, Stevie, and there ain't no way for to lock the door."

Steve did not relish the thought of a long walk

in the sun, but Mr. Todd was plainly alarmed. Grumbling a bit he set off on his errand.

The thoroughfare on which Gregor lived was a lane rather than a street. A block away the factories lifted high, blackened chimneys to the heavens. Here the scent of the woods north of the county road was missing. The air had a smudgy, sullen smell. The cramped houses along the lane seemed soiled, in some fashion, from the soot that drifted down from the sullen chimneys.

Gregor Helsing's house stood out from all the others. It was not that it was better—it was different. All the others seemed to have abandoned the struggle against the neighborhood, but the wooden fence around the Helsing lot was white-washed and straight. The cinder walk was level, and the narrow porch and the wooden steps looked as though they had been scrubbed that morning. Steve, looking around him, began to understand the passion for order that had cleaned the Jitney Shop and had sorted out the rubbish.

The front door was open. He knocked on the woodwork. A woman whom he knew at once for Mrs. Helsing came quietly along the hall.

"Gregor?" she said slowly as though English were still a difficult tongue. "He be around at the back." There was something in her accent that spoke of her Norwegian blood.

In the rear stood a small outhouse. There were

DIVIDING PATHS

people in it, for Steve could hear voices and a mysterious droning noise. He rapped for admittance. Almost at once the noise stopped and the door was opened.

"Hello, Steve," said Gregor and came out. Though he closed the door quickly, Steve had seen the interior. Two men were bending over what appeared to be a machine. One was Mr. Helsing, stooped, patient and gnarled. The other was Professor Lane.

"Mr. Todd wants his key," Steve said.

"Oh!" Gregor ran a hand into his pocket and brought it forth.

"He's afraid a dog might get in," Steve said lamely.

Gregor did not smile. Steve sensed that he was an unwelcome visitor. He walked away, and Gregor stepped into the shop and again closed the door quickly. In a moment it opened again, and Mr. Lane called sharply:

"Stephen."

Steve halted. As Mr. Lane limped toward him he saw grease on the thin, white hands.

"Stephen," the man said in his deep voice, "there are reasons why I must ask you to forget that you saw me here."

"Yes, sir," Steve said slowly.

"And please forget that you saw a machine." The melancholy eyes were commanding.

HIGH BENTON

"Yes, sir," said Steve for the second time. What else could he say? The principal limped back toward the outhouse, and Steve went down the cinder path and out into the lane. Presently, wet and sticky with perspiration, he was out of Smoky Hollow and back in the wide, shaded roads of the Waterford he knew. He was mystified—and hurt. Why had Gregor treated him like a spy?

When he got back to the Jitney Shop all was quiet. To his surprise, though the dog still lay in the wider shade, the door was unlatched as though something had jarred it open. Inside Mr. Todd, in a chair tilted against the wall, was contentedly snoring. Steve stuck the key in the lock and went home.

The manner in which Gregor had treated him rankled. For three days, with Tramp as his sole companion, he cruised the stretches of the river. Then he once more came to the Jitney Shop.

"Where was you, Stevie?" Mr. Todd asked. "Greggie's been a-lookin' for you every day. You ain't been sick again?"

Steve shook his head.

"Greggie's home for his victuals. He said you was to wait if you came."

Just then Gabby came into the shop.

"Come on," said Steve, "let's go for a row."

He led the way toward the river with his lips

DIVIDING PATHS

obstinately shut. Nor did he go back again during the vacation period.

He did not see Gregor again until the day school opened. Then Gregor was waiting for him on the steps outside the building. This time Steve was the one who did not smile.

"I didn't mean to hurt you that day," Gregor said. "Some time you'll understand; soon, perhaps."

In spite of past bitterness Steve believed him. In the cloak-room he had a flash of understanding.

"His father's invention," he said, thinking of the machine he had heard and seen. "They're keeping it secret."

He settled into his second year with veteran ease. In Mr. Frost he found the same understanding, the same warm sympathy, the same urge to better things. Mr. Garfunkel was, if anything, a bit more abstracted. There was only one surprise, and that came when Miss Cooper gave to this second-year class the dignity of "Mister" before their names. Gabby gave a stifled guffaw of laughter.

"I must ask Mr. Watson to remember," Miss Cooper said, "that he has been promoted conditionally."

That squelched Gabby effectively.

A summer away from books had broken Steve of the habit of study. Each day he promised himself that he would knuckle down—and each day

some new interest claimed attention. A strange desire for solitude came upon him. The woods above Waterford were never so fragrant and alluring. The stretches of Snake river were never more wonderful than under the magic of that Indian summer. Once more the Jitney House lost its attraction. Gabby brought him news of great feasting at Mr. Todd's—savory stews, pancakes, and fried fish and apple fritters. He listened unmoved. He made no attempt to play football. There were afternoons when he rowed up the river, found a sheltered bend, shipped his oars and dreamed away the hours.

And then, suddenly, the mood passed. All at once he had his fill of solitude and was restless for companionship. But Gregor, working steadily in the class-room, disappeared toward Smoky Hollow each day as soon as school was dismissed; and Will Adams' part of the town was still remote. So he once more picked up the raveling thread of his former association, and returned to the Jitney Shop, to Mr. Todd and to Gabby. The corners were once more dirty, the floor was slopped, and dust and vapors from careless cooking were beginning to trace greasy patterns on the windows.

"I'm glad Gregor's through with this place for another nine months," said Gabby. "He spoils it whenever he's in it."

"Folks what spends too much time fussin' up

DIVIDING PATES

ain't got no time to get on in the world," said Mr. Todd.

"That's what I say," Gabby agreed. "How about you, Steve?"

Steve did not answer.

"Oh, you're an old woman. Isn't he, Mr. Todd?"

"Maybe it's just that Stevie ain't been brung up right," said Mr. Todd.

Steve flushed, and then shrugged his shoulders. To walk out in anger would be to cut himself off from the only halfway friends he had.

All during that second school year he was subject to periods of restlessness, periods of intense activity, and periods during which he lost all ambition. To his teachers he became an exasperating puzzle. Miss Cooper stormed at him, Mr. Garfunkel observed him with the abstracted air that a scientist might give to a strange bug, and only Mr. Frost remained unchanged. Day in and day out Steve could read the same message in this teacher's whole bearing, and the message seemed to say, "Come! Make a fight of it. I'm with you any time you want to start." Occasionally, Steve was sent down to Mr. Lane's office. Once he found Mr. Tarkan there.

"Steve!" Mr. Tarkan said. "I'm astonished at this."

His face grew red. Mr. Lane limped around the

HIGH BENTON

desk to him. "Books do get dull at times, don't they, Stephen?" he asked in his deep voice.

Steve flashed him a look of gratitude. His awe of the principal was departing, and in its place was coming something that seemed to recognize the sympathy and understanding that was part of the man.

There were times when even Waterford seemed small and dreary. Steve had boyish visions of doing great things in the world. There were afternoons when he walked to the hill in the north that overlooked the town and sat, with his chin cupped in one hand and Tramp beside him, staring at the familiar picture. The white houses rose peacefully among the bare trees, a tradesman's wagon went slowly along a thawed, muddy road, and a flock of winter birds swept over the housetops and disappeared beyond Smoky Hollow. He envied the birds—and he felt a sudden hatred of muddy roads.

Following one of these moods a group of students began to talk of issuing a high school paper. Here was something new; here was fresh activity; here was adventure. Steve threw himself ardently into the plan. Once more Mr. Todd's Jitney Shop was forgotten, and the ink in the Waterford *Sentinel* office, where the paper was to be printed, arose to his nostrils with a flavor that Mr. Todd's choicest stew had never possessed. Again his books were cast aside. He canvassed the tradesmen for adver-

DIVIDING PATHS

tising, he became the reporter for his class, and he stood in the *Sentinel* office beside a type-case and watched Dicky Morgan, Hub Morgan's brother, deftly string the words together.

There came a day when the window of the *Sentinel* office held a small printing press, and a sign reading:

FOR SALE—\$30

For half an hour Steve stood in front of the window consumed by a fever of ownership. He wanted that press and its two fonts of type. He had visions of wonderful days in the Hiding House. He would print his school compositions; he would print some cards for Mr. Todd; he might even print an odd composition for Gabby and Gregor.

That night, as soon as his father came home, he broached the subject.

"Dad, there's a printing press for sale at the *Sentinel* office. It—it's only thirty dollars."

"Yes?"

"Yes." That single word did not sound promising. "If you'll lend me thirty dollars I'll pay it back."

Mr. Benton hung his coat on the hall rack and reached for the old, comfortable garment he wore at home. "When?" he asked.

"Why——" Steve hadn't thought of that. "I could work next summer."

HIGH BENTON

Mr. Benton walked into the dining-room. Tramp was jumping around his legs, and he paused to pat the dog's head.

"Steve," he said at last, "have you ever thought of what you're going to do when you leave school?"

Steve had not.

"I have been hoping that you would find your natural bent. You may have noticed that I never speak of taking you into my office. In my line, selling produce for farmers on commission, a snip of a boy might enter my employ, and in three or four years start out for himself and take a lot of my trade with him. Things are different when you have a profession or a technical training. If you were some manner of mechanical expert, no twenty-two-year-old could step out and build over your head. He'd have to spend his period of hard study just as you had spent yours. Do you see the point?"

Steve did——vaguely.

"Were you thinking of making printing your life work?"

"No, sir."

"Oh! Then this press would be in the nature of a toy. Thirty-dollar toys are too expensive, Steve. I'm sorry. I can't lend you money for such a purchase."

Steve was bitterly disappointed. After supper he refused to dignify the dining-room with his pres-

DIVIDING PATHS

ence and went up to his own room to study in seclusion. Presently he came downstairs with eyes once more lighted with hope.

"Dad, if I earn thirty dollars could I buy that press?"

"Certainly, Steve. Earning and borrowing are different."

"I'll work all summer," Steve said impulsively. Gregor would tell him how to go about getting a job. Next morning he confided his plan to Gabby.

"You going to work?" Gabby demanded. "Hub says when you set out to get a job you'll be the most surprised fellow in forty-seven States. It took him only a few hours to get a job; he says it will take you weeks. I could get a job where Hub works to-morrow."

"Who says you could?" Steve asked.

"I know I could," Gabby answered confidently. One of his shoelaces had broken and been reknotted, and a long end dragged sloppily through the dirt. He paused in the road to fix it, and Steve went on alone.

"Thirty dollars," Gregor said thoughtfully when he heard the story. "Why don't you try a farm, Steve? You can get fifteen dollars a month. There isn't much chance to spend money on a farm. You could spend the whole thirty dollars if you worked two months."

Steve wasn't impressed with farming. He walked

around to the *Sentinel* office and stared fascinated at the press. From there he went to the Jitney Man's.

Mr. Todd was washing a pair of socks. He hung them above the stove to dry, and the water dripped from them and hissed on the hot lids.

"You ain't poor as trash is you, Stevie?" he asked anxiously.

"Poor?" Steve demanded.

"Gabbie was sayin' that your pop ain't got no more money and that you was goin' to work."

And then Gabby came shuffling into the shop. He paused inside the door, shrewdly concluded that Mr. Todd had spread his story, and forced a grin.

"Gee, Steve, can't you take a joke?"

Steve felt himself helpless. It was impossible to make a dent in Gabby by saying things to him.

"Old man Helsing isn't working where Hub works any more," Gabby confided. "He just cleared out and never said a word. Isn't he the nut?"

"He knows enough to keep his mouth shut," Steve said stiffly, and departed.

The winter was about done, and the days held a promise of spring. He told himself that this time he was through for good with the Jitney Shop and with Gabby. He began to overhaul his boat. One of the oar-locks was loose, and a bigger pin was needed. After debating for a while, he went

DIVIDING PATHS

down to the Jitney Shop to get a pin. Mr. Todd received him as though his coming was an event.

"You ain't been mad at old 'Lias, has you, Stevie?"

Steve shook his head.

"That's what I was a-tellin' Gabbie here. I got somethin' saved for you." He brought forth a small piece of cake carefully wrapped in newspaper. "There now, Stevie, old 'Lias has been savin' that for a week."

In a dim way Steve realized that this was the old man's way of showing affection. The cake was stale and the icing had crumbled, but he did not have the heart to refuse it.

The weeks ran on, pleasantly after the Waterford fashion, and suddenly it was June again and time for more examinations. Gabby, viewing the future fearfully, broached an ominous subject.

"Say, Steve, you know how Mr. Lane runs things."

Steve had forgotten.

"Two years to make good, and then out you go. This ends our second year."

On the whole Steve's marks for the year had been fair. But there had been periods when he had dreamed, and during those periods the class had gone ahead and had left him behind. If the examination, by chance, ran along the subjects of those idle days——

HIGH BENTON

He took his books out to the Hiding House; and there, sitting in the doorway in the spring sunshine, he went back over the work of the year. The number of things he did not know well frightened him. After supper he resumed his desperate efforts to recover lost ground. That night Mr. Tarkan came to the house and he was not sent upstairs; but for once he was deaf to what his father and Mr. Tarkan said. Even the printing press in the *Sentinel* office window was forgotten. Had he been listening he would have heard that Congressman Shields was at last aware of the movement against him and had hurried back from Washington.

Ten days later the fateful examinations started. First came a period of written French and after that a period of oral French. Gabby emerged from the ordeal with a wilted collar and rumpled hair. Steve could not even guess how he had fared.

"That French teacher had it in for me," Gabby whined. "Anybody could see it. My father says French is an old woman's language."

A report ran through the school that the senior class had encountered a stiff two hours of mathematics.

That afternoon Steve's class battled with English narration. He was uncertain, but hopeful. The first-year class had had its turn at mathematics, and almost wept telling the tale.

DIVIDING PATHS

Steve was uneasy. Algebra was his weak spot. On a rigid test—— He wet his lips.

It rained that night, a heavy spring downpour. He studied rules of algebra until his head ached. Next morning the room in which he took commercial geography was wet and bedraggled. The roof had sprung a leak during the night and part of the class-room ceiling had fallen.

Commercial geography raised his hopes. In the afternoon, in the same disordered room, he had commercial history. His hopes went even higher. If he could do as well in the two remaining studies he thought that the outcome would be assured.

"Biology to-morrow morning," Gabby said dolefully, "and algebra in the afternoon. Who ever heard of a fellow getting a job because he knew biology? They ought to have men like Mr. Todd on school-boards."

Steve had little trouble with biology. He looked for Gabby, and found him walking off with Will Adams and talking earnestly. That surprised him. He had never known that Gabby and Will were friends. Will seemed to be shaking his head and objecting to something. Five minutes before classes convened for the afternoon Gabby came to him in suppressed excitement.

"Make sure to get the seat behind me," he said in a whisper. "Will Adams is going to pass me the problems I need. I'll slip them back to you."

HIGH BENTON

All you have to do is watch out that 'Phyllis' Archer doesn't catch you."

"But——"

"Come on; there goes the bell."

Steve saw that Gabby was following Will Adams. They went to the room set for the algebra examination. Will took a seat and Gabby took the seat behind. Steve took the desk in the rear of Gabby. Will Adams passing problems in an examination? The news was like a stunning blow.

Mr. Archer did not appear. At the end of ten minutes Mr. Lane's cane and dragging step were heard in the hall. The principal entered the room—alone.

He stood at the teacher's desk, pale and gaunt, while the examination papers were distributed. "I'm sorry to say," he said, "that Mr. Archer has been taken suddenly ill. I have an appointment at my office in fifteen minutes. If I remain here I must break the appointment. I have resolved, instead, to keep the appointment and to put the class on its honor."

"Oh, boy!" said Gabby in a joyous whisper.

The principal limped from the room and closed the door. There was an interval of blank silence. Then the class roused itself and went to work.

How long Steve stared at his examination paper he never knew. At last the words, the symbols, the figures, began to stand out. His heart beat

DIVIDING PATHS

heavily. The first problem offered no difficulties. He began it, finished it, and turned to the second.

By and by seven of the problems, for good or bad, were completed on his paper. He had done first those that offered the least difficulty. Those that remained had him biting his lips and cudgeling his brain. Gradually, on the eighth maze, he began to see light. His pen moved, and halted. He had seen a movement, a movement so quick as almost to defy detection. Will Adams had dropped a paper on the floor and had moved it back with his foot, and Gabby's foot had gone forward and had covered it. A few seconds later Gabby dropped his pen, stooped to recover it, and took the paper from under his shoe.

Steve drew a trembling breath. He struggled with the problem, but all the while, out of the corner of one eye, he watched Gabby. At last, with startling suddenness, Gabby dropped the paper on the floor and moved it back toward him.

His heart throbbed. He was sure that every eye in the room was watching him. Minutes passed, and he feared to make the attempt. Then accident did what design feared. His pen fell from his trembling fingers. He picked up the pen, hesitated, and all at once caught up the paper and sat erect.

More minutes passed before he stealthily smoothed it out. Two of the problems that baffled him were there.

HIGH BENTON

Twice he began to write, and twice he paused. Nobody would ever know. If he failed in algebra, if he were left back, if he were expelled——

He copied the first problem. He began to copy the second with a sinking heart, for the first one stared at him accusingly. And then the door opened and Mr. Lane came back to the room.

"Ten minutes more," he said.

Looking at the gaunt face of the principal Steve could not do it. He ran his pen through the problem he had copied, and did not finish the second. With his eyes on the floor he sat motionless until the time was up.

"Wait until I tell this to Mr. Todd," Gabby said triumphantly.

Steve went home to the Hiding House, and sat on the step and stared across the wagon road with brooding eyes. "I'm glad I didn't do it," he said at last.

There was nothing to do now but wait for the examination results to be made known. A day passed with no news. Twice he saw Will Adams, and Will appeared to have something on his mind. The second day was also barren, and he heard a vague rumor that Gabby wasn't coming back next year and had asked Will for help in algebra so he could show his father some respectable marks, and that Will had reluctantly helped him. Steve knitted his brows thoughtfully.

DIVIDING PATHS

"Aren't you coming back?" he asked Gabby.

Gabby grinned. "Do you think that saint would have given me a hand if he knew I was? I made him think it wouldn't matter if he helped me because I was through."

Once more Steve went home and sat on the step of the Hiding House and brooded.

The third day the whole school was restless. Just as classes were to be dismissed for the day, a messenger came to Mr. Frost's room with the announcement that Watson and Benton were wanted at Mr. Lane's office.

On the way downstairs Steve, frightened, asked a question. "Think he suspects anything?"

"He won't get anything out of me," Gabby said defiantly.

They walked into the principal's room together. Gabby was to be interviewed first, and Steve stepped out into the hall. The roof was being repaired to-day, and the rap-rap of the tinsmith's hammer volleyed through the building. He expected a long wait; but suddenly the door opened and Gabby came forth—smiling.

"I bluffed him," he said hurriedly. "Don't you admit anything. He can't prove a thing."

Then Steve stepped into the room.

Mr. Lane was standing by the window. His back was turned to the light. His face was in the

HIGH BENTON

shadow, but the afternoon sunlight fell full upon the thin, white fingers that gripped his cane.

"Stephen," he said in a deep voice, "what about the algebra examination?"

Steve did not answer. His head drooped, and hung in shame. What would come next he did not know, but he was sure that he was through as a pupil of the Waterford High School. Dismissed for having a hand in cheating! What his father would say—— He swallowed a lump in his throat.

The door was closed, and the sound of the tin-smith's hammer was subdued. He heard the tap of Mr. Lane's cane, but did not raise his head. The man's hand, strong for all its thinness, rested on his shoulder.

"Stephen!"

Slowly—slowly—Steve's eyes came up.

"How many problems did you copy?"

"One, sir."

"Which one?"

"The one I crossed out."

There was a pause. The sound of the hammer had ceased and in its stead came the scrape of a ladder along a cornice. The principal's eyes looked deep into his. He saw clearly in them things he had seen only dimly before—gentleness, compassion and a wonderful tenderness.

"I believe you, my boy," the man said. "We are going to forget that you were even tempted. I

DIVIDING PATHS

was a boy once, and I know that boys will make mistakes."

Steve's head hung again.

"Stephen," said the principal, "I like you because you are not a liar. I despise a liar."

In the cloak-room Steve found his hat and pressed it against his eyes. When he came out-of-doors it was something more than the June sun that kept him blinking. Gabby, waiting impatiently on the other side of the road, hurried toward him.

"How did you make out?" he demanded. "Did you fool him? What did the old cripple say?"

With a passionate gesture Steve pushed him aside. "Go away from me," he said thickly.

"So that's it, is it?" Gabby cried. "Peached on me, didn't you? Saved yourself, eh? You can't work any game like that on me. You or no old cripple——"

Steve's fist struck out. With a gasp of surprise and pain Gabby staggered and fell. Instantly Steve was over him, waiting. But Gabby, hugging the ground and sniffing, made no attempt to rise.

"I'll get Hub after you," he whined.

Steve studied him as he lay there—careless, unkempt, disreputable. The mud-spattered shoes, the unbrushed, dusty trousers, the stained coat, all told their story. He looked down at his own shoes, at his trousers. Abruptly he turned on his heel and walked away.

HIGH BENTON

Mrs. Benton, resting upstairs in her room, thought she heard somebody come into the house. She went out into the hall and leaned over the banisters.

"Steve! Are you downstairs? Is that you?"

"Yes, mom."

"What are you doing?"

"Brushing up."

His mother came downstairs. He had whisked his clothing and was blacking his shoes.

"Steve," Mrs. Benton said, "go down to the station and meet your father. It will please him to see you clean and neat. We were worried about you—you were getting to look so much like that Gabby Watson."

Steve paused, looked away a moment, then went on with his blacking.

CHAPTER VIII

JOURNEY'S END

STEVE awoke, the morning after the fight, to find all his values changed. When Gregor had suggested that he seek work on a farm he had not looked upon the idea with favor; now a farm seemed the best place to go. If he stayed in Waterford he would be running into Gabby at every cross and turn—on the river, along the roads and at Mr. Todd's.

His break with his old crony changed him in more ways than one. Something of his boyhood was left behind; something of manhood took its place. He sensed that in all this he had drawn closer to his father.

Gabby did not come near school during the last week, and for this Steve was thankful. He was anxious to begin work as soon as possible. A week ago he would have taken his problem of finding work to Gabby or to Gregor Helsing; now it seemed the most natural thing in the world for him to consult his father. Mr. Benton looked at him quizzically.

"What put farming into your head, Steve?"

HIGH BENTON

"I can save all my money on a farm."

"Who told you that?"

"Gregor Helsing."

"The boy I met outside Todd's?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did that Gabby boy say?"

"Nothing; I mean not much."

Whatever it was that lay in Mr. Benton's mind, his face suddenly cleared. "You might advertise for a place, Steve. I could leave the ad. to-morrow at one of the city newspapers. Let's see how we can word it."

The advertisement was soon ready:

BOY—Strong and willing, experienced with small garden, wants work on farm for summer. Stephen Benton, Waterford.

"I'd make that read young man instead of boy," Steve said.

Mr. Benton made the change.

Three days later Mr. Whiting, the mail carrier, brought a letter. Steve read it eagerly:

Mountain View, June 24, 1919.

STEPHEN BENTON,
Waterford.

DEAR SIR: I can use a willing young man, and can start you at once. I will pay \$10 or \$15 a month according to what you're worth. If you want the job come right up.

JOURNEY'S END

The letter was puzzling. The body of the communication was plain, but the signature was a baffling scrawl. There was a capital A, and then a rapid run of the pen with a letter on the end that ran above the line—it might have been an a, b, d, h, k, l or t. His mother could not decipher that signature. He sat on the porch and racked his brain until his father came home.

"Mountain View is a small place," Mr. Benton said. "This man is a farmer, and that means that he ships produce to the city. The thing to do would be to go to Mountain View and show the letter to the station agent. He could tell you where to find your man."

"But suppose he couldn't?" said Steve.

"You don't have to take this offer," said his father. "See what turns up to-morrow or next day."

But all that turned up was that he ran into Gabby one day at noon, and Gabby passed as though he did not see him. There were many letters, but they were for his father, letters from all parts of the county and each one having to do with the campaign against Congressman Shields. By the end of the third day it was apparent that the Mountain View farmer was the only man who desired such service as he had to offer.

So it came to pass that Steve sat down with his

HIGH BENTON

father and mother to decide whether he should embark upon this adventure.

"Of course," said Mrs. Benton timidly, "there isn't much chance of a boy of Steve's age becoming lost, is there?"

"If he got to Mountain View," said Mr. Benton, "and nobody knew this farmer, he could take the next train for home."

It was agreed at last that he should go. He would have to ride to Crescent City and there take the train for Mountain View. Only two trains a day ran to his destination from Crescent City. One left at 8:10 in the morning; the other left at 4:51 in the afternoon.

"You had better take that morning train," said his father. "It's easier to locate a man in the daytime than in the evening."

"What time will Steve have to leave here to make connections with that 8:10?" his mother asked suddenly.

There was another period of studying time-tables. Presently Steve looked breathlessly at his father. He would have to leave Waterford on the 3:43 milk train. He had never in his life been abroad at such an hour.

"Really," said Mrs. Benton, "I'm a little afraid——"

"Steve's getting to be a man," said his father.

JOURNEY'S END

Steve drew in his breath sharply. "Getting up at three in the morning won't worry me a bit."

The proposition held an element of high romance. He told his plans to Mr. Whiting, to the butcher, to Gregor Helsing.

"You'll enjoy it," said Gregor. "Will you rent me your boat for the summer?"

"No," said Steve; "I'll lend it to you."

Gregor laughed. "Well, that's better. I suppose you know Gabby is working with Hub Morgan in Mr. O'Brien's machine shop?"

Steve hadn't known it. Evidently Gabby had been advised by some one in authority not to come back to school. Steve's eyes grew thoughtful. Of the three boys who had organized the Ivy Club that night in the Hiding House he was the only one privileged to take up his studies in the fall.

Later that same day he met Will Adams—and told his story again.

"Does that farmer need two helpers?" Will asked eagerly. "You ask him when you get there."

It was a new experience for Steve to find himself envied. He began to feel somewhat important, and this emotion deepened when the *Waterford Sentinel*, in its next issue, announced that "Stephen Benton, who has just finished his second year at high school, has accepted a position out of town for the summer." The word "position" had a very high-sounding ring.

HIGH BENTON

He was to start for Mountain View Monday morning. Sunday night he packed his suit-case and left it in the lower hall, set his alarm clock for three o'clock, and went up to bed. As he lay there he heard Tramp barking back in the old wagon road, and next the sound of familiar voices out in the road. To-morrow those way-faring boys would be treading the same familiar round, but he would be out in the big world. He smiled contentedly, and turned on his side, and dropped off to sleep with the aroma of his father's pipe in his nostrils and with the murmur of his mother's voice in his ears.

His eyes were heavy with sleep when the ringing of the alarm clock awakened him. In a moment the thought of the journey that lay ahead roused him thoroughly. He jumped from bed, fumbled for the matches, and lighted the gas. His pulse throbbed with excitement.

Twenty minutes later he came downstairs softly, for he did not want to awaken his mother. But there was a light in the kitchen. He paused, filled with a thought of burglars. Then a shadow fell upon the wall, and he sighed with relief. His mother was already up. The water kettle sang upon the stove and the table was spread for his breakfast. There was a quiet about the house that was almost uncanny. Every sound rang out with noisy echoes. Nothing tasted exactly as it did when he

JOURNEY'S END

ate it in broad daylight. There was concern in his mother's eyes, but he pretended not to see it.

A heavy step sounded on the stairs. "You had better hurry," his father said gruffly.

Instantly he was up from the table and out in the hall for his suit-case. "Good-by, mom. Don't you worry about me."

For a long moment she held him close, and he found his eyes blinking.

"You'll write often, Steve, dear?" his mother said in a low voice.

"Let me catch him not writing," said his father. Their hands gripped in a man-to-man handshake. Something he knew for paper money was pressed into his palm.

"You go back to mother," Steve whispered. "I guess she's feeling badly." He opened the door, closed it, and was alone in the dark of the outside world.

He had never known that night could be so black. He set forth whistling, but soon the melody ceased. A foggy mist lay over Waterford, and under the soggy blanket everything was hushed and mysterious. The street lamps, few and far between, had a blurred, moist radiance. The trees, the hedges, the fences, commonplace sights by day, took on terrifying shapes.

A black mass rose out of the darkness almost directly ahead. With his heart in his throat he

shied out toward the curb. Why—why it was only a tree! For the first time he noticed that the air had a thin, chilly, early-morning feel. It seemed safer in the middle of the road away from the dark shapes that crouched along the sidewalk. He wanted to look back over his shoulder. He had never before been afraid to walk close to Waterford hedges and trees.

Out in the middle of the road he quickened his steps. A moment later his flesh grew cold. There was somebody behind him. He swung around to face this thing whatever it might be. It came upon him with an impetuous rush.

“T—Tramp!” he said in a shaky voice. The dog bounded upon him, and he patted its head and went on. His courage came back. The companionship of the dog was bracing. Now he went boldly toward the station, and soon passed Elias Todd’s Jitney Shop. Above the dusty transom gleamed the pallid reflection of a light. He almost fancied he heard Mr. Todd snoring.

The station was deserted; the waiting-room was dark. A single oil lamp made a sickly attempt to light the platform and the town road that came down to the tracks. He put down the suit-case and stood beside it listening intently. Not a sound broke the stillness of the night. The whole world seemed to be wrapped in slumber. Far down the track a

JOURNEY'S END

little gathering of red and green railroad lights winked and blinked at him fitfully.

A sound came to his ears at last, the faint creaking and groaning of a wagon. He heard the slop of horses' feet, a man's voice, the sodden bumping of full cans. Presently a farmer's milk wagon came into view and paused at the tracks. The horses drooped in their harness after the fashion of horses that work far into the night. The driver swung down to the ground and stared at him sharply, but said not a word.

Far off in the distance a tiny light appeared on the dark horizon. By degrees it grew in size. A whistle, deep and full-throated, echoed back from the hill to the east of the town. The rails began to hum. The driver held the horses' heads and spoke soothing words. Out of the night, the light now a great glare, a train came down upon the station. Tramp, frightened by the roar, cowed at Steve's feet.

"Good-bye, Tramp," said the boy.

The dog waved its stump of a tail and looked at him out of puzzled eyes.

There was only one car for passengers—a combination day and baggage coach. A yellow haze of tobacco smoke blurred Steve's eyes as he took a side seat next to the door. Frankly curious he surveyed his fellow travelers. Two or three were puffing at pipes, a few read newspapers, the others were asleep.

HIGH BENTON

Several forms, knees drawn up sharply, sprawled across whole seats dead to the world; others slept upright and nodded and swayed jerkily as the train pulled out. One man muttered incoherently. Another man, his shirt open at a great, hairy chest, snored heavily with every intake of his breath. The car reeked with a dead, smoky, hot, sweaty smell.

For a while Steve tried to see out the open window—but there was nothing to see save here and there a pale light in the window of a house along the way. At every station the train whistled and stopped, received its burden of clattering milk cans and went on. Now and then men arose sleepily and dropped off at their destinations. Twice the conductor awoke sleepers and warned them that their stations came next. The readers tired of their newspapers and stuffed them into the seats. The muttering man aroused himself and leaned against the window. The hairy-chested man snored on in deep contentment.

The excitement of the journey began to wear off. The stale air and the swaying of the train gradually lulled Steve's senses. He dozed, nodded, awakened suddenly and clutched for his suit-case. It was still there. The car was now more than half empty. The mutterer was gone, and the hairy-chested man was sitting up and stretching ponderous arms. He, too, departed at the next stop. Steve went down and took his seat, propped one

JOURNEY'S END

elbow on the window, and stared dreamily into the blackness as the train rushed on through the night.

By and by there came over the land a suspicion of the dawn. Off in the east a tracing of sickly gray appeared across the sky. At one of the stations, in an interval of quiet, a rooster could be heard crowing.

For a long time that tracing of gray did not change; then, suddenly a whole section of sky lighted faintly as though some unseen hand was throwing wide the shutters of the night. Bit by bit the grayness crept down and touched the earth, and slowly the landscape took form. Next the grayness crept into the disordered car and seemed to mark out every rumpled newspaper, every soggy cigar end on the floor, and every listless passenger. A brakeman went down the aisles turning out the lights. Steve stirred in his seat and sighed.

And now the sky grew faintly radiant like a rosebud about to bloom. Red and purple and gold were there, now stripe upon stripe, now a confused blend, now a sudden mass of crimson. From the earth a lazy mist rolled upward. The first gleam of sunlight touched it and painted it with fantastic images. Soon the mist vanished. A woman came from a house with a full apron and began to toss food to a flock of chickens. Steve could see her plainly.

Twenty minutes later the train rattled over a net-

HIGH BENTON

work of noisy switches and ran into the Crescent City terminal. The air of the train-shed was good after the stale smell of the baggage car. Holding fast to the suit-case, Steve walked hesitatingly toward the waiting-room from which a steady stream of men and women was pouring. Near a door he paused and began to count the bewildering array of tracks. One, two, three, four——. A man bumped into him, confused him, and he entered the room and took a seat in a far corner.

After a time he became acutely aware that he was hungry. There was a wide door that seemed to lead to the street. He went out and was thunder-struck at the traffic—automobiles, trucks, street cars, men and women without end. More people passed him in five minutes, he thought, than would be met with on a whole day in the streets of Waterford. Just as Gregor Helsing pondered the movements of ships so did he now contemplate what business it could be that sent all these people scurrying about like ants.

With healthy curiosity he walked along the street, but was afraid to go far lest he lose his way. Chancing upon a restaurant, he went inside and ordered a bowl of cereal and a cup of coffee. Back in Waterford at this hour Cruller Joe's place would probably be empty; here the long tables, running out from tiled, mirrored walls, were crowded. All the while he ate he kept one watchful eye on his

JOURNEY'S END

cap and suit-case, warned by a sign that read: "Not Responsible for Personal Belongings." When he came forth again an armless man, a few pencils stuck in a pocket, was sitting at the curb. It was Steve's first sight of a beggar, and twice after he had passed he paused and looked back.

A uniformed guard was calling his train as he entered the station. With the suit-case banging against his legs he walked out into the trainshed, found track eight, and climbed aboard a car. It was clean and sweet-smelling. He settled back into the seat luxuriously.

As the train sped toward Mountain View his pulse grew fast and a sparkle came into his eyes. What would Mountain View be like? Would he be able to find this man whose name he did not know? Would he be worth \$15 a month if he did find him? What would his journey's end bring?

"Mountain View next!" called the conductor.

His heart throbbed. Within a few moments he would know whether or not this had been a wild goose chase. As the train slowed down he stepped out into the aisle. When it stopped he was the first person—the only person—to drop off.

The station was not unlike the station at Waterford—the same clapboard walls, the same sloping roof, the same freight room at one end, the same baggage truck against the wall. To the left, on a siding, were three cars that had evidently just been

HIGH BENTON

loaded. The station agent, with yellow slips of paper in his hand, was standing near the last car talking to a tall, gray-haired man.

At sight of that tall man a frown gathered in Steve's eyes. There was something familiar about the face. He thought he could put his tongue right on the man's name—and couldn't. And yet—and yet——. He shook his head impatiently. How could he know anybody at such a far-away place as Mountain View?

The station agent walked toward him. He took from his pocket the letter that had come in answer to his advertisement.

"Can you tell me where I can find this man?" he asked, pointing to the signature.

The agent looked. "Hey, Aaron," he called. "Here's a boy looking for you."

Every nerve in Steve's body jumped. He knew now why there had been something familiar about that face. He had come to work for Aaron Todd, Elias Todd's worthless brother Aaron.

CHAPTER IX

NEW THOUGHTS

AARON TODD had come to the station that morning in an old-fashioned buggy drawn by a contented and ancient horse. His journey there had probably been leisurely. Steve did not know how it could have been otherwise, for on the way back the horse plodded along in a fashion that took no heed of the passing hours. Steve disliked the horse, and disliked the buggy, and disliked, just then, the whole world in general.

Aaron Todd seemed to have no desire to hurry the animal. "Shiftless like his brother," Steve thought bitterly. Using the long carriage whip as a pointer, Mr. Todd indicated houses along the way, gossiped concerning the crop prospects of this field and that, and prophesied a good season for apples. But though Steve nodded, and now said a perfunctory "Yes" and now a perfunctory "No" it is doubtful if he heard more than half the conversation. He sat stiff and straight, his feet on the suit-case, and wondered how the adventure was to end.

HIGH BENTON

At length the horse, without urging, turned from the road and entered a broad dirt driveway. Up ahead through the trees Steve caught sight of an old-fashioned home with a gabled roof and a wide inviting porch. The house was painted an immaculate white; the shutters were a cool, friendly green. Inside a woman was singing:

Lead, kindly light, amid the encircling gloom,
Lead thou me on;
The night is dark, and I am far from home,
Lead thou me on——

"We're home, Stevie," said Mr. Todd.

Steve shivered. Stevie! It was almost as though Elias Todd were beside him on the seat. The horse stopped, and he jumped down and pulled out the suit-case. Mr. Todd stepped out at the other side. The horse at once ambled away and disappeared around the side of the house.

"Here's Stevie, ma," cried Mr. Todd. The singing stopped and after a moment a woman came out on the porch drying her hands on her apron. There was something about her that Steve liked at once. Her eyes, behind steel-framed spectacles, were strikingly friendly.

"Isn't it fine you were at the station, pa?" she said, and tilted Steve's head back and looked at him closely. Under the scrutiny he flushed. "You look like a good boy, Stevie," she said, and the flush

NEW THOUGHTS

deepened. "Come, pa; show Stevie up to his room. Like as not he'll want to change his clothes."

"He can put the horse away when he comes down," said Mr. Todd.

Steve followed his employer to a room on the second floor. There was a bed there, a chair, a table and a dresser, but no rug or carpet upon the floor. He did not miss them. The boards were bright from much scrubbing. Everything smelled as clean as meadow hay.

The door closed, and Steve stood motionless in the middle of the room. Elias Todd's brother! Should he go home! But what would he be able to say to his father? All the mean things that old 'Lias had told him ran through his memory and filled him with a sense of melancholy. Why had it happened that, of all the men in the world, Aaron Todd should have been the one to send for him? And yet if he went home without giving the place a trial——

"I'll stay one week," he decided.

When he came downstairs Mrs. Todd called him to the kitchen. "I dare say you're hungry, Stevie; boys most generally are. Eat that pie and drink that milk before you go out."

The pie was—well, pie, deep, and rich, and brown and spicy. He ate it to the last crumb, said an abashed "Thank you," and moved toward the door.

"You'll find a big hat in the barn," said Mrs.

HIGH BENTON

Todd. "Caps aren't much good about here, Stevie. When you hear me call dinner you come right in. Pa Todd don't like to wait for his victuals. Besides, I dare say you'll be hungry again."

Steve found the barn behind the house. It was divided into two sections, one section for horses, the other section for cows. Just at present both sections were deserted. Steve unharnessed the horse, and it promptly stepped into the barn. He surmised where the carriage was to go, and ran it back to its place. But the harness he dropped upon the floor.

"Suppose you hang it up," a voice said dryly, and he found Mr. Todd standing in the doorway. "Spying on a fellow," Steve muttered under his breath, and hung the harness upon its pegs. Mr. Todd showed him how to clean out stalls, and then left him to his labors. He worked stoically, neither whistling nor talking to himself, until the dinner call came. Then he went to the house, washed his hands and face from a bucket of water, and went indoors. There were three people already at the table, Mr. and Mrs. Todd, and a tall, powerful man who looked at him with frank interest.

"This is Jerry," said Mr. Todd. Steve was prepared to shake hands, but Jerry merely bobbed his head and Steve slid into his seat. The others talked of various farm interests; he ate in moody silence, and from time to time stole puzzled glances at this

NEW THOUGHTS

man who looked so much like Elias Todd. One thing was beginning to puzzle him. Why should Aaron have wanted to "live off" old 'Lias?

The meal over, he went back to the barn. The amount of work that was still to be done discouraged him, and he leaned on his fork and stared around him with dispirited eyes.

"Tired?" Mr. Todd asked from the doorway. He gave a start and went to work. "Stevie," said the man, "we're peculiar about time around here. If anybody took my horse or my tools I could buy others, but when anybody takes time that's gone for good. When you get through here you'll find me in the field behind the barn."

Long before the stable was finished Steve's arms ached as they had never ached before. When the job was done, he wanted nothing so much as to lean his back against something and rest. But the order had been to go to the field in back of the barn, and he went. It was a field of corn, and Jerry was riding the rows with a one-horse cultivator. So Jerry was a farm-hand!

Jerry stopped the horse. "Hey, Stevie!" he shouted. "The boss says for to cut the brush around the field. You know how?"

Steve shook his head.

"I'll show you." Jerry lumbered toward him like some big bear. He produced a sickle, and showed

HIGH BENTON

him how to hold the stiff brush and to hack it cleanly near the root. "Now you try it."

Steve tried, and soon got the knack. But it was fatiguing work. Before half an hour had passed, his back felt as though it would break. Mr. Todd came to the field, looked at him in silence and walked away.

"You won't get another chance to talk to me," Steve grunted, and kept on doggedly. At last the call came to quit. Once more he washed from the water pail, and came around and sat on the porch steps.

"The carrier'll be around shortly if you have a letter to write," said Mr. Todd.

Steve went up to his room, took out a post card, and hesitated. He wanted to write that he had come to work for a slave-driver and would start for home in a day or so; he wanted to pour out all the things that old 'Lias had told him about the worthless Aaron. But in the end he wrote "Arrived safely; everything all right," and took the card down to the letter box that stood where the drive joined the narrow country road.

"Tired?" Mr. Todd asked when he came back.

"No, sir," Steve said grimly.

"To-morrow I'll show you how to milk."

After supper Steve undressed and crept into bed. And Gregor Helsing had told him he'd enjoy it! He turned, and eased his back, and slept—and was

NEW THOUGHTS

not aware that Aaron Todd came into the room softly and for a long time stood looking down at him.

In the morning he had his lesson in milking, and tried until his hands seemed dead. There was more of the brush to cut, and he worked dully until noon.

"Hey," cried Jerry; "you're a slow worker, Stevie."

In the afternoon he picked beans along rows that seemed to have no end. And so his second day came to a close. Supper was almost ready, but he climbed upstairs to his room and threw himself clothes and all across the bed. Next morning Jerry gave him an amused grin as though his weariness was a good joke.

There came a day, before the week was out, when he awoke to find the torturing stiffness and soreness almost gone. There seemed to be a terrible hollow in his stomach, and at the breakfast table he ate until he was ashamed to help himself to more—and still the hollow was there.

"Better have a few more pancakes, Stevie," said Mrs. Todd, and placed them on his plate.

There was more brush to be cut that day, and he set out for the corn-field with a springy step. Mr. Todd stopped him at the barn.

"Glad to see you feeling better, Stevie. See if you can't clean up that brush a bit faster."

Steve went to the field with his lips set tight.

HIGH BENTON

At the end of the day he was tired, but not exhausted. After supper he started upstairs, paused, and went out to the porch. Mr. Todd was there quietly smoking a pipe.

"Hello, Stevie," he said. "Not going to bed so early to-night."

"No, sir."

"Ma," Mr. Todd called, "Stevie's going to sit with us a while. Bring out some of that home-made candy, will you?"

Mrs. Todd brought out the candy when the dishes were done. It was still daylight, and presently Jerry came lumbering around from the barn and sat on the lowest step.

"Care for the paper, Jerry?" Mr. Todd asked.

Jerry grinned. "I don't care for readin'." He sat there, a heavy, hulking figure of a man, drowsy as the night came down. By and by he shuffled up to bed.

"Jerry's tired to-night," said Mrs. Todd.

"Jerry'll be tired all the days of his life," said Mr. Todd. "When a man has nothing to sell but his muscle he must expect to give a lot of it."

Steve, his eyes puckered, reached absently for the candy. Off in a nearby meadow the frogs croaked a monotonous chorus—but he did not hear it. In Waterford there was a light every so often along the roads; here everything in front of the porch was a black, baffling wall—but he was not

NEW THOUGHTS

conscious of the darkness. A queer thought was running through his mind. Jerry and the horse had worked together in the fields, and now the horse had gone to its stall and Jerry to his bed.

"I must write a letter home," he said, and stood up. The letter was in better spirit than the ones that had preceded it. He signed it, and sat biting the end of the pen-holder. He could hear Jerry snoring in the next room. After a while he wrote another line:

P.S.—I think I learned something to-day.

Strangely, as his body strengthened to the work, he found his desire to quit the place growing hazy. Variety, with its spice, came into his employment. Occasionally, he rode to town behind the plodding old horse, and his whistle matched the call of the flitting birds in the trees. Sometimes he drove the six cows on their lazy way to pasture through the ripe freshness of the morning. He came by degrees to love the wide spaces and the strange quiet. It made him think of that discontented day back in Waterford when he had sat on the hill and had watched the winter birds sweep across the sky. He also loved the view of mountains blue and hazy in the distance, and of the rolling contented sweep of the valley below.

He had thought, when first he came to Mountain

HIGH BENTON

View, that Aaron Todd's acres were broad and deep; but he found, as his knowledge grew, that the surrounding farmers called Mr. Todd's place a "small truck patch." If it was a small farm, it was a good farm kept rigidly to account by the man who owned it. If Mr. Todd bought a man's time he wanted it. Steve had learned that much early. When the day was done the old man unbent and became sociable and gracious. More than once Steve smarted under his reproof, only to lose the sting as Mr. Todd talked to him mellowly on the porch that night. Bit by bit, almost in spite of himself, he came to like the man for his quaint exactness and his solid way of looking at things. How different he was from old 'Lias living on from day to day in the filth and the grease stench of the Jitney Shop! More than once Steve marveled that these two men could be brothers.

Morning and evening farm wagons rolled down toward the railroad, almost as he had seen ships come up the stream at Rivermouth. Even here, he thought in a sort of wonder as his mind pondered things Gregor Helsing had said to him, people were making things, and shipping them away, and receiving other things in exchange. He thought of that often, and suddenly he awoke to another truth. Almost all men, in some fashion, helped to produce something that other men needed. Mr. Frost had told them that one day as they studied commercial

NEW THOUGHTS

geography. It was remarkable how often things that Mr. Frost said bobbed up. Late one afternoon, as he and Jerry and Mr. Todd were loading a wagon with corn he spoke the thoughts that were in his mind.

"Everybody must find work," said Mr. Todd. "Some labor at the bottom, some superintend from the middle, some direct from the top."

"You've got to work whether you want to or not," Steve said thoughtfully. "You can't escape it. There's no such thing as saying you won't."

"So long as you have to work," said Mr. Todd, "you might just as well try for a high place as accept a low place." He went into the barn for canvas to cover the load, and Jerry grinned vacantly at Steve.

"Hey, Stevie," he said; "crazy talk."

Thus far Steve had kept the secret of Aaron Todd's identity. Now he was suddenly seized with a desire to tell his news. He wrote to his father that he was working for Elias Todd's brother. He also wrote to Gregor. From Gregor came this reply:

I told Elias this afternoon. You should have seen him. His mouth hung open. "Six cows," he said, "and horses and wagons, and a farm. You ain't foolin' old 'Lias, Greggie?" For the rest of the day he sat in his chair and kept shaking his head. Just before I left for home he said, "I always was one to speak well o' Aaron. I always knowed Aaron would get on."

HIGH BENTON

Steve had begun to smile as he read the letter, but at the end his face was sober. It was strange how much he was hearing lately about getting on. He dropped the letter in his lap and thought of old 'Lias, and the bolts and nuts strewn at random—and he thought of good-natured, ignorant Jerry. You had to play the game whether you wanted to or not; and some men went up and some stayed down.

If Steve marveled to find himself, for the first time in his life, with no idle moments in the day, the thought fled as soon as it came. It seemed fitting and proper for everybody about the place to be busy. He found himself finishing one job and stepping without loss of time to the next. Every minute was crowded. If Mr. Todd could be sharp when the work went wrong, he could be generous of praise when it went as it should.

"Well done, Stevie," he said one morning in commendation. The boy's cheeks flushed with pleasure. "Oh, why should the spirit of mortal be proud? That's what a poet says, Stevie. He's wrong. A man has a right to be proud of a good piece of work. If he isn't proud of it there's something wrong inside. He won't go far."

"I didn't know you read poetry," Steve said in surprise.

"There are some grand poems, Stevie." That night, as they waited for supper, Mr. Todd said

NEW THOUGHTS

suddenly: "Perhaps you'd like to do some book reading." He led the way into a room that was new to Steve, a room with row after row of book-cases along one wall. "You might like something of Dickens, Stevie, or Walter Scott, or Stevenson, or——"

"I think I'd like Stevenson's 'Travels with a Donkey,'" Steve said impulsively. Afterwards he could not tell why he had asked for the book. In Miss Cooper's class-room the travels had bored him tremendously; but he found when he opened the volume now that it gripped his interest at once. After supper he returned to the narrative.

"Hey, Stevie," Jerry called. "What you read?"

Steve told him.

Jerry roared with rough merriment. "Hey, you hear that, Mr. Todd? Steve thinks farmers go ridin' with a jackass."

Mr. Todd smiled and puffed at his pipe. By and by, when it grew so dark that Steve was forced to put the book down, he spoke of certain passages in the travels that he remembered.

"I didn't like it when I had it in school," Steve said in wonderment.

"Like it now?"

"Yes, sir."

"Your brain's gained something. If folks could see education develop the way they can see a plant develop, more boys would stick to school. Boys

HIGH BENTON

think they're getting nowhere just studying on from day to day, but all the time something's growing under their hair. Then along comes a time to make good with what they know, and because they know they make good."

"And if they don't know?" Steve asked.

"How much does Jerry know?" Mr. Todd cross-questioned.

Steve looked at the farm-hand bobbing asleep on the lower porch step, then he looked down at the book. Presently he went up to his room and began to undress thoughtfully.

Almost before he knew it, his first month was up. After breakfast he went out to clean the barn. He had not been working long when Mr. Todd called him to the door.

"Pay-day, Stevie." The old man pulled an old wallet from a deep pocket. "How much did I say I'd pay you?"

Steve's heart beat fast. "Ten dollars or fifteen dollars according to what I was worth."

"We'll make it fifteen dollars, Stevie."

The wonder of it was with the boy all day. Time after time he took the money from his pocket and counted it again to make sure that his good fortune was real. Fifteen dollars! If he should lose it—— He grew cold at the thought. When the day's work was done he hurried to the house.

NEW THOUGHTS

"Will you mind my money for me, Mr. Todd?" he asked.

"Certainly, Stevie. I'll give you a receipt——"

"Oh, that isn't necessary," said Steve, and went around to the water-pail to wash. Jerry was there ahead of him.

"Hey, Stevie, pay-day," cried the farm-hand. "What you do with your money?"

"Save it," said Steve.

Jerry laughed. "Circus at Ramsey Saturday. Big day, Stevie." His eyes lighted in anticipation of coming events.

The thought of going to the circus had not once entered Steve's head, even though for two weeks, whenever he drove to the station, his eyes had been held by gaudy posters on fences and barns. Saturday he began his round of labors as though to-day was to differ in no way from other Saturdays. At 11 o'clock Mr. Todd came to the field where he was spraying potato plants.

"Almost through, Stevie?"

"Yes, sir."

"Finish up. You can have the afternoon off if you care to go to the circus. Here! Don't slight the job. If you're doing it, do it right."

Steve restrained his impulse to rush. When he came to dress, he groaned as he buttoned his collar. Last Sunday it had bothered him in church; to-day it was worse. He squirmed his neck, and grew red

HIGH BENTON

in the face, and finally came downstairs looking hot and uncomfortable.

"How much?" Mr. Todd asked reaching for his wallet.

"About a dollar," said Steve.

The old man looked at him a little surprised. "Sure that will be enough?"

"Plenty." Steve was thinking of the printing press in the window of the Waterford *Sentinel*.

In spite of the tight collar, he set off gayly. The road was tree-shaded, and the hot August sun came through only in dazzling splotches. Now and then, at the top of a hill, he paused and rested. The land, as far as he could see, was green with the live color of growing crops. Here and there farm buildings clustered in snug comfort. Far off to the right a herd of cows, looking no larger than collie dogs, grazed in lazy contentment. The whole picture looked like a country scene in a toy store window at Christmas time. Steve sighed, and mopped his face, and went on his way.

As he drew near to Ramsey the road grew lively with men, women and children a-foot and in vehicles. Suddenly, faint in the distance, sounded the brassy notes of a band. Those in the carriages and wagons whipped up their horses. Steve quickened his pace.

The circus tents, drab and dirty under the summer sun, stood in a field near the town border.

NEW THOUGHTS

There was a circus smell to the air, an odor of wet sawdust, of cooking, and of animals. The big tent had been erected at the far end, and to reach it one had to pass through a wide aisle of smaller tents. These sheltered the side-shows, each with its own fearfully painted canvas poster and its own hoarse-voiced, flashily dressed barker. Steve successfully fought off a desire to see a Hindoo snake charmer, a live man with legs of stone, a lady with a beard that touched the ground and a man who swallowed swords of amazing length. But a five-legged horse claimed him. The picture showed five legs, there could be no doubting that. His work on a farm had interested him in horses. He paid ten cents and walked inside.

At the moment he was the only customer. The horse was feeding from a bucket. So far as Steve could discover it differed in no way from any other horse he had seen. An attendant who needed a shave and who smelled of whiskey was raking out some soiled straw.

"Where's the fifth leg?" Steve asked.

"Where's your eyes?" the man demanded. He pointed to the off hind leg. There, above the hoof, was a six-inch outsticking stump of flesh.

"You call that a leg?" Steve asked disdainfully.

The attendant leaned on his rake. "What do you think it is, a house and lot? Give it a chance to grow."

HIGH BENTON

Steve passed out into the open air wrathful at the fraud that had been practiced upon him. There were other shows along the line—a cat with a dog's head, a village of dwarfs, and a man billed as the "Human String"—but Steve regarded the barkers with a fishy eye. He had been cheated once, and he did not propose to be cheated again.

The band, gorgeous in uniforms of blue with gold trimmings, began to play in front of the main tent. He went in that direction with the crowd. When the band stopped, three ticket windows begged the attention of the crowd. It was still twenty minutes before show-time and Steve, desiring to prospect farther, turned aside.

"Here's your pop-corn," cried a familiar voice. "Fresh made every hour. Sweetest and freshest pop-corn on the lot."

Steve whirled in his tracks. There, behind a refreshment booth, stood Freckles Smith. At the same moment Freckles saw him.

"Hello there, Steve," he called breezily; "how's tricks?"

Steve said that things were all right. "I thought you were with the moving pictures, Freckles."

The other boy shifted his eyes. "Those fellows wanted too much and I wouldn't stand for it. They can't put anything over on me. I'm a pretty wise guy. I got out and left them in the lurch."

There was something about Freckles to-day that

NEW THOUGHTS

was far removed from the Freckles of Waterford; far, too, from the Freckles who had made such an awkward figure that afternoon on the screen of the Waterford Arcade. To-day he seemed harder, a little too knowing—and coarse.

“Heard any news from home?” he asked. “Gabby Watson got fired from O’Brien’s machine shop; he’s working nights in the lunch-wagon for Cruller Joe. Gregor Helsing’s playing nurse to the Jitney Shop. That fellow gives me a pain; he thinks he’s somebody.”

Steve made no comment.

“Heard you were working for a farmer,” Freckles went on. “Regular little pal for the cows and the chickens, eh?”

Steve smiled and nodded.

“Gee! That’s rich. None of that for mine. Say, I bet I’ve seen half the United States since I’ve been with this mob. Bet I make three times as much as you do.”

Steve didn’t dispute the statement. It was time for the circus, and he said good-by. It was queer, he thought, the way things went—Gabby expelled from school and working in a cheap restaurant; Freckles failing in his eighth-grade examinations and ending as a pop-corn seller with a third-class circus. He scratched one ear in meditation and thought of some of the things that Aaron Todd had told him. Maybe it wasn’t queer—just natural.

HIGH BENTON

As circuses go, the show under the big tent was pretty poor. Nevertheless, for two hours Steve enjoyed himself hugely. The clowns had him chuckling and laughing, the trapeze performers sent thrills along his spine, the chariot races made his blood run faster. As the show drew to a close, the ring-master cried aloud the tidings that a concert would follow. The price was ten cents. But Steve, remembering his experience with the five-legged horse, refused to be beguiled.

When he came out in the open the sun was still shining, but hazily as through a mist. Off in the west, above the mountain tops, ugly clouds were gathering. The feel of rain was in the air. Before he had gone very far his ears caught the faint growl of thunder.

Storms in the mountain country take shape rapidly. He had scarcely left the circus behind when the day became gray. The thunder was louder now, and lightning played about the clouds. The chatter of the birds was still. The branches of the trees hung motionless. All nature seemed hushed as though awaiting a wrath that was to come.

Suddenly a wind sprang up. The trees stirred—lazily, then with a wilder motion. From gray the day quickly turned to dusk. The sand of the road went whirling and swirling before the rush of the wind. There was a crash of thunder that made

NEW THOUGHTS

Steve jump. A drop of rain fell upon his cheek. He turned up his collar and walked the faster.

Softly, at first, the rain pattered in the dust. All in an instant it became a deluge. It lashed through the trees, it turned the dusty road into a mire of mud, it drenched Steve to his skin. An inky blackness settled over the road and blotted out all sight. The wind, rising to a gale, moaned and shrieked and tore at the green branches overhead. And the thunder, crashing in rolling volleys, seemed to shake the flooded, tortured ground.

A fear, greater than he had ever known, crept into Steve's heart. A flash of lightning showed him something falling. He cried aloud and stood rooted, sure that a tree was to crush him. It was only a branch. The next flash showed it lying in the road. He sprang over it and ran, ran, ran——

Breathless, at last, he slowed down to a gasping walk. His hat was gone, and the rain ran down his face. He did not know where he was, nor how far he had come. Momentarily he sought shelter under a giant elm. He held to the great trunk, but the way it trembled and shook increased his fear and sent him on again. Once, in the blackness, he strayed from the road and stood lost, his heart beating wildly, until the lightning gave him his bearings. The wind gathered at his back, and shrieked at him, and sent the water down his neck, and tried to hurry him along. All the elements seemed

HIGH BENTON

to have united to wreck the land that had smiled so brightly that morning.

Like some drowned out, homeless thing Steve struggled through the storm. His fear had given place to terror. Once, as the wind rose to fury, he crouched and waited for he knew not what. The frenzy of the gale let up for a moment, and he arose and struggled on.

A lightning flash, brighter than any that had gone before, dazzled him. He thought he had seen a house—and waited in weak hope. Another flash! This time he saw it plainly—a small, wooden building. There was a door, a single wooden step—Then the darkness again.

But he had marked out his path. The building offered shelter; he stumbled forward. His foot struck the step. He mounted it and felt for the knob. His fumbling fingers found a latch. It gave. The wind, tearing past him and pelting him with rain, wrenched the door open with a bang.

He pushed the door shut against the wind and stood leaning his back against it, weak and spent, his heart pounding against his ribs. Into what he had stumbled he did not know. He did not care. He was under a roof, out of the rain, away from that stark terror that had dogged his steps.

Something told him all in a moment that he had found sanctuary in a church. The next lightning flash showed him a high altar and row upon row

NEW THOUGHTS

of empty pews. In the darkness that followed he became conscious of a tiny red light that flickered, and winked, and burned clear, all untroubled by the tempest that raged. Slowly he went forward, almost on tip-toes, and found a pew and stepped in. His wet, dripping shoes struck the kneeling-bench. He had meant to sit there, but almost unconscious of the action he sank to his knees.

In here the noise of the storm was hushed. He did not pray. His body still shook and trembled. He gazed at the calm, winking light as though fascinated. Its serenity steadied him in some fashion he could not explain. Over him, as the minutes passed, there stole a sense of peace and comfort. Except when the lightning made everything bright there was only the red light to show that this was a place of worship. He could not even see the pew ahead. But a certain something was there, a something that quelled his fear, that relaxed his tired muscles, that was superior to the storm. His soul stirred with an emotion that was exalted.

How long he knelt there he did not know. Gradually he grew conscious that the din had grown less and that the darkness was lifting. He went to the door and opened it. The rain had stopped. Far in the distance the thunder still rumbled. Overhead the clouds, broken into gray patches, raced across the sky. Even as he looked they separated, a cloud edge was touched with gold, and a flash of the set-

HIGH BENTON

ting sun came through. He gazed back into the church, stood there a moment in silent, rapt contemplation, and closed the door softly and came away.

Under the dripping trees he walked toward home. All about him was the havoc of the past hour—broken branches everywhere, and here and there a tree uprooted. Presently he turned a bend and stopped in his tracks. Coming toward him was Mr. Todd, driving the ancient horse at an unaccustomed gait.

“Stevie!” The old man’s voice shook. “I thought something had happened to you. Climb in! We’ll get you home and into dry clothing. Wrap up in this blanket.”

Home went the horse at a faster clip than it had traveled in years. Around the place were more signs of devastation. Bushes that had been there that morning were gone. One of the shutters was missing from the house.

“I’ve got him, ma,” cried Mr. Todd. Steve found himself bundled upstairs; and while he dressed Mrs. Todd kept calling anxiously to him to hurry down and get a hot drink. When he came down a steaming cup was waiting for him. He had never been a lover of tea, but now the drink put new life in his veins. He gathered from the talk that the storm had been the worst in years.

NEW THOUGHTS

"Were you afraid, Stevie?" Mrs. Todd asked him.

"I was for a while." He told them of how he had stumbled upon the church, and of how his fear had left him. "I—I sort of felt God was there," he said in a voice that was almost a whisper.

"He was," Mr. Todd said quietly.

Boy-like, in a few days he forgot the storm, but the memory of the church remained. If he ever thought now of the things that Elias Todd had said about the worthless Aaron, the thought brought a smile to his lips. Poor old Elias! He had begun to feel for him the same sort of pity he felt for Jerry. They were in the dark, their eyes were blind. Sometimes, pausing in the fields to mop his brow, he took stock of himself and gave thanks that destiny had sent him to this mountain farm. He had learned things—great things. Sometimes he thought of Gabby dishing out crullers and coffee in a lunch wagon. To what goal, he wondered, could such a job lead?

Occasionally, in the newspaper that came to Mr. Todd, he found news of his home world. He gathered that Congressman Shields was again to run for Congress at the November elections, and that Mr. Kerrigan was to oppose him as an independent candidate. They were already holding meetings. Once he read of a meeting at which Mr. Tarkan had presided. A fight was on, good gov-

HIGH BENTON

ernment against bad; and remembering the conferences that had been held at his house, his eyes kindled.

A few weeks after the storm he drove home from the village one day and found an alert, aggressive man talking to Mr. Todd. He gathered that the man's name was Harvey, and that he was selling gasolene farm machinery. Mr. Todd and the salesman walked about the farm, and he busied himself with his duties. He was a trifle late for supper. When he came to the table the others were seated and an extra plate had been laid for Mr. Harvey.

"You don't need a tractor," the salesman was saying. "You couldn't keep a tractor busy; the place is too small. There would be too many idle hours. I wouldn't sell you a tractor even if you wanted to buy one."

Steve's face must have reflected a profound amazement. Mr. Harvey laughed.

"That seems to surprise you, young man."

"I thought a salesman's business was to sell goods," Steve stammered.

"It is; but a salesman represents both his house and the customer—he must play fair with both. Suppose I sold Mr. Todd a tractor and he found, as he would, that it was a bad investment. Other farmers would come and ask him what he thought of his tractor, and he'd tell them he had made a mistake in buying. There wouldn't be another

NEW THOUGHTS

chance to sell another tractor in this neighborhood. The Tarkan-Boylert Company feels that it is part of its business to protect the customer's interest."

"The Tarkan-Boylert Company?" Steve's eyes were wide. "I know Mr. Tarkan. I live at Waterford. That's where they have their factory."

The salesman looked questioningly at Mr. Todd.

"Stevie's working here for the summer," said the old man. "I told you about him this afternoon."

"Oh!" Steve got the idea that Mr. Harvey was studying him sharply. He wondered what Mr. Todd had said. "Mr. Lane's your principal, isn't he?"

"Yes, sir."

"It's a pity about Lane." Mr. Harvey was speaking now to Mr. Todd. "I was in his class at college. He was our star fullback. One day, in a game, he was injured. That injury turned him from a strapping athlete into a cripple. Doctors have never been able to help him. There are times, they tell me, when he suffers agony. Another man would have lost his courage, but Lane goes right on doing his work from day to day. A man like that is a hero. They tell me he's very popular with the students." This last to Steve.

"He—he's all right," Steve said huskily. He knew now the reason for that gaunt, white face, those sunken eyes, those midnight walks through the streets of Waterford. The pain would not let

HIGH BENTON

Mr. Lane sleep. He suspected, too, why the shades were drawn whenever a football rose in the air from the school yard, and why the principal had turned away from the football team's banquet. This was the man old 'Lias and Gabby Watson called derisively "the old cripple." His cheeks burned at the memory.

Jerry was to drive into the village that evening, and it was arranged before the meal ended that Mr. Harvey should go with him. While the farm-hand was harnessing the horse, Steve edged over to the salesman.

"I'm going to work for the Tarkan-Boylert Company some day."

"Gasolene farm machinery is just finding itself," Mr. Harvey said earnestly. "Think of the acres that lie idle because farmers can't work them—not enough men to drive teams. Tractors will put them under cultivation. It means more food for the people; it means cheaper food. The man who sells machinery like that is doing a mighty useful work in the world. He doesn't have to be ashamed of his job."

Steve was sure of it. Hadn't he heard Mr. Harvey say he wouldn't accept an order from Mr. Todd?

"Down in South America are thousands of acres that the tractor will some day put under cultivation. I'd figure I was a missionary if I went down there

NEW THOUGHTS

to make tractors known. It's wonderful wheat land, and the world must have bread." All at once Mr. Harvey laughed. "It's hard to stop me when I get started. What department have you in mind?"

"Selling department," Steve answered promptly.

In the gathering dusk Mr. Harvey looked at him a full minute. "Better study Spanish," he said at last.

That night Steve's thoughts were with men and women who wore gay colors, who lived in cities set on hills, and who walked through sun-baked, narrow streets, and lounged about wide plazas. He had seen such pictures in his commercial geography. The class had been discussing South America, and Mr. Frost had said—— Steve drew in his breath sharply. Mr. Frost had said "There's a country that spells opportunity for American commerce." And Mr. Harvey had said "Study Spanish." Every way he turned he ran into some truth Mr. Frost had taught.

Perhaps he would study Spanish. It was queer, he thought, that no matter what you wanted to do you had to study if you wanted to get any place. Unless, of course, it was a job like working for Cruller Joe or selling pop-corn with a circus.

The days passed, and presently it was the first week in September and his time at the farm was up. Mrs. Todd had to put a piece in the neck-band of

his shirt, and he had to buy a larger collar in the village.

"Stevie," said Mr. Todd, "I guess you're about ten pounds heavier and twenty-nine dollars richer." He counted out two months' salary less the dollar that Steve had drawn for the circus. The boy pinned the money safely in an inside pocket.

He was to depart on the 8:50 train for Crescent City, wait around for three hours and take the 12:15 train for Waterford. The hour of his going found him just a little sad. Mrs. Todd packed him some sandwiches and cake and told him that he had been a good lad. Jerry was taking a load of fruit to the station, and he was to sit beside the farm-hand on the front seat. Mr. Todd waited with him at the driveway until the heavily loaded farm-wagon rolled toward them.

"Stevie," the old man asked suddenly, "am I as bad as Elias painted me?"

If Steve had been holding the suit-case just then he would have dropped it. The wagon halted. There was nothing for him to do but to climb aboard. Mr. Todd handed up the case.

"If you want a job next summer, Stevie, you know where to come. And don't put too much faith in people who laugh at learning. Good-by."

"Good-by, sir," said Steve. "I—I won't."

The wagon went on its way through the cool September morning. Steve sat in a brown study;

NEW THOUGHTS

but Jerry sang lustily and lashed at the low branches of trees with his whip. They had a minute or so to wait at the station.

"You got winter job in the city?" Jerry asked.

Steve said he was going back to school.

"Big boy like you?" Jerry shook his head, puzzled. "You funny boy, Stevie."

At Crescent City Steve found that there had been some trouble on the railroad. The schedule had been disarranged; and a train that should have left at 7 o'clock was just about ready to start. The guard was calling "All aboard!" and he sprinted for the gate and wormed his way through as it was being closed. He had written his mother that he would be home about 3 o'clock. Now he would surprise her by arriving three hours earlier.

The night he had ridden on the milk train seemed to belong to a dim and distant past. He felt, without being able to put his finger on just what had happened, that his outlook on life had entirely changed. He pondered things that he had never before paused to contemplate. His eyes ran over the passengers in the car. They all did some sort of work; they all earned some sort of income; they all strove for something. Some were successful; some were not. Why?

He fell to contrasting Jerry and Mr. Harvey: one eager, interested, ambitious, the other heavy, stupid and dull. Mr. Harvey looked into a future, Jerry

HIGH BENTON

plodded through the day's toil, day after day without change. Ten years from now Jerry would be doing the same work, for Mr. Todd or for somebody else. Jerry looked upon going back to school as funny; Mr. Harvey said "Study Spanish!"

Was it education, knowledge of things, that made all the difference—or just luck? If it was just luck, why did the people who knew things seem to have all the luck? Mr. Frost had a habit of saying, "The men who strive are the men who arrive!" There! He was quoting Mr. Frost again. Strange how this teacher's words stayed with him.

The miles had fled unnoticed as he had passed the problem through the laboratory of his mind. Presently he began to realize that he was looking at vaguely familiar country. With a start he glanced at his watch. It couldn't be possible. But it was. The hours had fled with the miles, and the train was coming to Waterford. It rattled over the bridge that spanned the county road. It passed the factories at Smoky Hollow. The brakes ground against the wheels, and the cars jerked, and shook, and stopped. He was home!

Oh, but the old town was good to look at! He feasted his eyes on the familiar station and on the road that crossed the tracks and ran beyond. He walked up the road, came to Main street and paused. The Jitney Shop was a block ahead. Something

NEW THOUGHTS

within him rebelled against meeting Elias Todd just yet.

He turned north toward the next side road. His eyes chanced on the office of the Waterford *Sentinel*. In the window—— Why, it was the printing press still unsold. He had forgotten all about it.

He crossed the street and stared at it. There was the same sign, fly-specked now and dusty:

FOR SALE—\$30

He had \$29 in his pocket and probably \$6 at home. Two months ago the press had fascinated him. He had itched to own it. Now he frowned, and ran a work-calloused hand over his chin, and ended by turning away and resuming his walk toward home.

Tramp was the first to greet him; the sound of his step had been enough. Even as he turned in past the hedge the dog, yelping frantically, came tearing around the side of the house and sprang upon him. The paws spotted his suit, and the nails clawed it. But Steve dropped the suit-case to the ground and hugged the animal fiercely.

“Haven’t forgotten me, have you?”

Then the front door opened. “Steve!” his mother called. “Steve!”

He ran to her, the dog springing about his feet and almost tripping him. Just as she had held him upon the morning of his going, now she held him on the day of his return. He tried to speak and

HIGH BENTON

couldn't. Over her shoulder he saw his father in the dining-room doorway, smiling something of a queer, uncertain smile. Evidently his father had stayed home to be there to greet him. He held out his hand.

It was half an hour later before they noticed how he had filled out.

"Feel my muscle," Steve said proudly.

They felt his biceps, his mother in sudden awe, his father with a wide grin. During dinner—a happy, excited meal—the printing press came into the conversation.

"It's still waiting for you," said his father.

"I'm not going to buy it," Steve said slowly. "I looked at it on the way home. It's pretty well battered; I hadn't noticed that before. I got thinking of the number of days I worked in the fields, and of how sore my muscles were at first—— It's too much to pay for a second-hand printing press."

"Learned something of values in two months, haven't you?" his father said quietly.

"I think so," Steve said just as quietly.

Tramp sat at his feet and stared up at him as though his dog soul had been hungry for its master. Steve patted the homely head. The stump of a tail threatened to wag itself loose.

"School opens Wednesday," Mr. Benton said. "You've worked hard all summer. Suppose you rest a few days and start Monday week."

NEW THOUGHTS

Steve dropped his hand from the dog's head.

A trace of worry showed in Mr. Benton's face. "I think you'd be foolish to stay out longer than Monday week."

"I'm not going to stay out at all," said Steve. His eyes held his father's full. "I met a man up at Mr. Todd's and he told me some things. There's going to be a lot of trade between the United States and South America. I had better start right in Wednesday because I want to ask Mr. Lane can I take Spanish."

CHAPTER X

THE VOICE OF AMERICA

THAT afternoon Steve renewed acquaintance with the things that lay closest to his heart. The garden behind the house was plump with the fatness of late summer vegetables. There was a time when the rows had seemed to him to be of tremendous length; but Mr. Todd's acres had given him a new perspective. To his eyes the garden now seemed but a toy. To keep it cleanly cultivated would be play for one who knew what it was to cut yard after yard of brush through the heat of a July afternoon.

He walked with meditative steps the path that led through the clump of trees, and came out on the old wagon road. Except that the wagon ruts were not so deep, nothing seemed changed. The Hiding House—— He gave a start. One of the great oaken doors was gone. The threshold stood exposed to any chance wayfarer.

He found the door inside, propped against the work bench. The rusty hinges had broken. Once he had taken the old place, for all its glamor, as

THE VOICE OF AMERICA

a matter of course; but he had been away from it for two months, and to-day it held a deep appeal. The open doorway seemed to take away its privacy and to make it common. It was no longer his; it was everybody's. He shed his coat, found new hinges, and set to work. It was characteristic of the training he had received from Aaron Todd that he should have started the job at once.

The door rehung, he contemplated the familiar interior—the dim rafters, the dusty corners, the faint bullet holes, the fireplace. The ashes of the Ivy Club's last fire lay gray and cold. The logs on which he and Gabby and Hub had sat were undisturbed. After a moment of contemplation he lugged the logs back to the wood-pile and swept the hearth clean. By this action he seemed, once for all, to put the club and its last associations out of his life.

Late in the afternoon as he sat on the porch, idly watching the shadows lengthen along the quiet street, Gregor Helsing turned in at the gate. Steve sprang to his feet. He had formed a habit of noticing things, and he observed the direct way Gregor walked, the fashion in which he held his head, the straight-forward manner of his whole bearing. It was in direct contrast to what he had observed of Freckles Smith that day at the circus.

"I was hoping you'd come around," Steve said happily.

HIGH BENTON

"I didn't expect to see you until to-morrow," Gregor told him. "But somebody told Elias you were home, and he sent me over. He wants to see you."

Steve frowned.

"Your letters to me have him all worked up. You'll come around, won't you?"

"Monday, perhaps."

"Don't keep him waiting too long, or he'll die of curiosity." Gregor sat on one of the steps. "You look different, Steve."

"How?"

"I don't know—exactly. You look as though you had found something."

"I have," said Steve. He told of many things that had happened up in the mountains—of the farm-hand who laughed at what he could not understand and who bobbed asleep when the day's work was done; of Aaron Todd's belief that everybody should struggle to reach the top; of the Tarkan-Boylert salesman who had come to the farm with a wonderful message, and of his own desire to study Spanish. It was all very disjointed, but Gregor seemed to understand.

"South America!" he said softly. "That day at Rivermouth, Steve, when I spoke of ships carrying goods to far places you looked at me as though I were daft. But that's the romance of business. The salesman who discovers a new market simply

THE VOICE OF AMERICA

follows the explorer who discovers a new land. One brings civilization; the other brings the tools of civilization."

Gregor's eyes were shining. Steve was breathing deeply.

"And civilization means knowledge," he said. He couldn't tell what had put the words into his mouth.

The door opened and Mr. Benton came out on the porch. Both boys came to their feet, Gregor with fine courtesy, Steve because he remembered that his father had once practically told Gregor to stay away.

"This—this is Gregor Helsing, dad," he stammered.

"I am always pleased to meet Steve's friends," Mr. Benton said. "I hope we'll have the pleasure of seeing you often."

The interruption brought the conversation to an end. Gregor said a quiet "Don't keep him waiting too long," and strode briskly down the road. Steve went up to his room and stared thoughtfully from the window. A memory of past days reproached him. His mind went back to the time the Jitney Man had saved him the piece of cake as though it were a precious thing. Abruptly he went downstairs.

"Going out, Steve?" his mother asked from the kitchen.

"Mr. Todd wants to see me," he told her.

HIGH BENTON

“Well, don’t be long. Supper’s almost ready.”

A smile touched his lips. Once his mother would have objected fearing that he would sit with Mr. Todd and eat the messes concocted on the rickety stove. He was past that, too. He drew a deep breath.

The Jitney House had not improved. As he paused in the doorway he saw the same old interior, only now it seemed darker and gloomier than it had ever seemed before; or perhaps it had been like this all the while and he had not noticed it. The smell of grease and damp was heavy. One of the rear windows had been broken and had been patched with a cutting of card-board. Mr. Todd, his thin jaws working over his tobacco, was filing the end of a piece of iron.

“Stevie!” he cried in a tremulous cackle of delight, and dropped the metal and the file. “Old ’Lias knowed you’d come.” He brought a chair, and his wrinkled, blue-veined hands shook. “You wasn’t jokin’, Stevie, ’bout Aaron?”

“No; I worked for him two months.”

“You ain’t foolin’, is you, Stevie, ’bout the farm?”

“It’s a good farm,” said Steve, “and there are horses, and cows, and an orchard. It—it— Oh, it’s just a big house among trees, and everything clean and pleasant, and all kinds of things to eat.”

The old man smacked his lips at the mention of

THE VOICE OF AMERICA

things to eat. "Aaron didn't happen, now, to speak about old 'Lias, did he, Stevie?"

"No," said Steve. He did not have the heart to reveal that brother Aaron knew in what colors he had been painted.

"Stevie!" The tremulous voice was anxious. "You didn't go for to tell Aaron——"

Steve shook his head.

"You're a good boy." One of the thin hands patted his knee. "Old 'Lias was only foolin.' Aaron always was one to get on. Everybody thought old 'Lias was all het up. 'Cause why? 'Cause old 'Lias made believe to speak mean o' Aaron's doin's. Just foolin', Stevie. Tee, hee, hee!"

Steve drew away a bit. The Jitney Man did not notice the movement. A load of anxiety seemed to have lifted from his stooped shoulders. His eyes were brighter. He fished through his pockets, gathered a palmful of loose tobacco, and deftly tossed it into his mouth.

"I'd like for to visit Aaron," he said genially. "It ain't right for brothers not to be close. I've had a powerful hankerin' to see Aaron. You couldn't write the direction, now, could you, Stevie?" The voice became wheedling.

Steve wrote them and came away. At the corner he mopped his face and stared back at the old Jitney Shop.

HIGH BENTON

"The old hypocrite," he said, and then said it again. "The old hypocrite."

Monday morning the shop was closed and Mr. Todd was gone.

Steve went to Snake river that day and found his boat among the reeds. The oars were under the seats. He lifted the anchor, pushed out into the stream, and let the tide carry him lazily up toward the trolley bridge. It was good to be back on the old river with the familiar smell of the salt marsh in his nostrils. It was good to loaf there and to know that it was his right to loaf. He remembered something that Gregor had once said to one of Gabby's jibes—that you enjoyed a good time more if you earned it.

Reaching the trolley bridge at last, he ran out the oars and rowed back against the current. Anchoring the boat, he came ashore and struck out across the hill for the town. Halfway down the first street he was suddenly aware of a shambling figure that stopped at sight of him and then stiffened and came on.

It was Steve's second meeting with Gabby Watson since the day they had come to blows on the high school lawn. Gabby seemed to have gone lower in the scale. Once he had been lazy and untidy; now, to that, was added an air of cheap, swaggering smartness. Once, perhaps, that air would have fooled Steve—not now. He had seen too much of

THE VOICE OF AMERICA

it: in Freckles Smith, selling sweets at the circus, and to a degree in Jerry, the farm-hand, laughing ignorantly at things that he did not understand. Steve was able to weigh that air and appraise it for what it really was—the weak subterfuge of those lost to ambition and accomplishment.

Gabby's eyes, furtive as of old, surveyed him narrowly. Steve did not speak. What was the use? But at the corner he paused and looked back. Everything about the boy who had passed shrieked "Failure, failure, failure." Steve sighed and went on.

Presently he was outside the school, and paused to survey it with the eyes of a voyager returned to native haunts. The cupola stood out against the September sky forever reminiscent of the boy who had once dabbled up there with chemicals and compounded an explosion. But Steve was not thinking of explosions. There was magic within those walls, the magic of learning, a great magic that he had only lately come to respect.

A shadow moved across one of the windows. Mr. Lane was in his room. Steve went up the stone steps and into the building. His steps rang hollowly through the long, deserted hall. He tapped on the office door and stepped across the threshold.

"Stephen!" The principal came limping across the room. The summer vacation seemed to have restored him. His face was tanned. The lines of

HIGH BENTON

suffering were not so pronounced. The grave eyes were not so sunken. At sight of the trailing leg and the cane, a lump came into Steve's throat. He knew the story of that leg now, and every ounce of his boyish sympathy and admiration was stirred.

"Stephen!" said the principal again, and held him off. "Why, boy, you're almost a man grown. You must have had a wonderful summer. Ready for another school year?"

"Yes, sir."

"No desire to quit?"

"No, sir."

"Ah, Stephen, it is good to find that spirit. So many boys drop out of high school at the end of the second year just when a little more training means so much—so many. They remind me of carpenters who start to build a house, and throw away their tools with the outside walls up and the interior unfinished."

"But no carpenters do that, sir."

"Boys do," Mr. Lane said gently. He limped back toward the desk. "Come, Stephen; sit here and tell me all about it."

For the third time since coming home Steve told the story of his summer with Aaron Todd. As he recounted his talks with the farmer, the principal's deep eyes kindled as though here he recognized a kindred spirit. The white, thin hands came

forward and rested on the boy's knees. And so they remained until the tale was done.

"Stephen," said Mr. Lane, "you have tasted labor and you have found it good as all honest labor is. You have seen the contentment it gives to those who strive, and you have seen the sorry portion of those who are content to drift and to know no ambition, blind men with eyes that will not see. It has been your good fortune to have met an old man of great wisdom."

"I know it," Steve said simply.

"As for Spanish——" The principal shifted his cane. "We have no facilities for a Spanish course."

The boy's face fell.

"You plan to work for the Tarkan-Boylert Company?"

"With them," said Steve.

"Oh!" The grave face broke into a smile. "That is better—and different. I am in a position to know that the Tarkan-Boylert people are eager to teach Spanish to boys who enter their employ."

"Then they know about South America?" Steve asked, surprised.

"All real American business knows," said Mr. Lane, smiling. "The difficulty is to find employees who see the vision, too. All advancement is planning ahead. Education is planning ahead, fitting oneself for the years to come. The boy who goes behind a counter and sees no further than his job

HIGH BENTON

will always be behind the counter. Lincoln, walking miles to borrow a book, saw ahead. Edison, selling his wares on trains, saw ahead. And you, picturing business explorers with the tools of civilization in their packs——”

“Yes,” Steve said breathlessly.

“That is seeing ahead, too. Everything lies before you, Stephen.”

The boy came from that interview with his ambition strengthened and nourished. It was a matter of surprise to find that Mr. Lane no longer awed him. In the past the principal had seemed to stand in the clouds beyond his reach, and had seemed to be clothed with a mysterious and disquieting power. Something of the mystery was still there; all of the power; but the remoteness was gone. He could sit with the principal and talk as he would talk to his father—or to Gregor.

Wednesday he went back to school, and went back subtly changed. These people who taught day after day in the classrooms no longer seemed natural enemies, watching hard-eyed for faults on which they could alight. It was no longer his wit against theirs. The school was a laboratory in which many things were put in his head. But his head differed from all crucibles in this: that it was responsible for the mixture and to what use it was put.

His studies now ran principally to political

economy, bookkeeping, civics and chemistry. Chemistry interested him particularly because his judgment told him that, if he intended to be a real farm machinery pioneer, he would have to know something of the composition of iron and of steel, and of the organic principles of soil. But it was hard to struggle with the alphabet of the science when his soul longed to soar and do the big things. Bookkeeping was a frank drudgery. His bounding imagination regarded it as prosaic and uninteresting. English, too—though there was not much of it—he had a tendency to shirk. His interest in his general work was so keen, so real, that Miss Cooper, instead of upbraiding him, viewed him with puzzled concern. On the way out, that day, she paused for a few moments in Mr. Lane's office.

And when next Steve came to her room for a period, he found that in some way he had been marked out. He could feel the teacher's concentration surrounding his desk.

"Will you remain a few minutes, Mr. Benton?" Miss Copper asked when the period was over.

He waited, and the class looked at him curiously. For the first time he took due notice of how many boys had dropped out since the sophomore year. The class was overwhelmingly feminine. A vague feeling of resentment stirred him. He resented girls looking at him in that aloof, disapproving, what-have-you-done way. And he remembered

HIGH BENTON

the class's first trip of inspection to the laboratory, and of how the girls had gingerly touched the test tubes and the paraphernalia and had turned up their noses at the acid marks and the splashy stains, and of how it had annoyed him at the time.

"Mr. Benton," said Miss Cooper, "I suppose you will go into business when you graduate?"

"Certainly," said Steve, and wondered what Miss Cooper thought he would do—loaf!

"Have you picked out your line? Will you be an inside man, or do you plan to work outside on your own initiative, master of your own time, meeting your problems unaided and doing your own thinking on the spot?"

The picture was alluring. Steve's chest swelled a little. "I'll work outside, I imagine."

"That means that anything you have to tell to the firm, you'll have to tell by letter. It is an asset, Mr. Benton, to be able to write clearly and to make someone else understand exactly what you mean."

Steve's chest fell. He rubbed his nose gingerly. "I hadn't thought of that," he said.

"I'd think of it if I were you."

That night Steve came to his father with a question. "Dad, what kind of letters did I write you from the country?"

"Fair," said Mr. Benton; "fair, Steve."

Fair! Steve frowned. Fair wouldn't be good

THE VOICE OF AMERICA

enough if he were writing to Mr. Tarkan from South America. Thereafter there was no more trouble with his English lessons.

But it was political economy and civics that held him with the strongest grip. Other studies moved his imagination, but these stirred his soul. Here was his country, its laws, its liberty, its ideal of justice. Over and over again he read those portions of the text books dealing with voting and elections. The ballot, to him, represented America itself—its voice, its judgment, its all-powerful decision. By its power men were elevated to leadership, lifted from simple tasks to the seats of the mighty.

At home now he lived in an atmosphere of election-campaigning. The fight between Congressman Shields and Mr. Kerrigan was drawing to a close. At the Waterford station a Shields banner, strung across the roadway, informed the citizens that one good turn as Congressman deserved another. On Main street a Kerrigan banner bore the announcement that Mr. Kerrigan would represent the many, not the few. His home had become a sort of district headquarters; and suddenly, as the campaign grew more intense, the scene of operations was shifted to the Hiding House. Tables and chairs and desks were hired. A telephone was installed. A dozen lamps were bracketed to the walls. Volunteers sat at the tables and addressed envelopes

by the hundreds. An old-fashioned stove was set up in front of the fire-place against the time when the nights would blow raw.

Steve, wrought up, forgot to feel a pang at the passing of the old building's fine air of mystery and seclusion. At night, when his lessons were done, he came to the Hiding House, and took an obscure place, and listened with fast-beating heart to the talk that went on around him.

It became apparent, after a while, that the Snake river valley was the real battle-ground. The northern end of the Congressional district was apparently with Congressman Shields; the southern end with Kerrigan. The valley, in the middle, might decide the issue. Once the Congressman came through, stopping here and there to speak. Three times Mr. Kerrigan addressed meetings in adjoining towns. And then the Waterford *Sentinel*, which had thus far been neutral, abruptly threw the weight of its support to Congressman Shields.

Steve's father ate very little that night. At the Hiding House there was a dismayed gathering. Men tried to argue weakly that the *Sentinel* had very little influence, but the majority closed their lips grimly and said nothing. They all, Steve thought, had the appearance of men who were waiting for something. At last it came, a quick compelling ring of the telephone. Mr. Denton answered

THE VOICE OF AMERICA

the summons, listened a moment, and then put the receiver down gravely.

"Kerrigan is coming on," he said, "to take charge of the situation. He will be here to-morrow."

Steve stole out of the building and stood in the dark, silent wagon-road. Kerrigan was coming! Unseen voices whispered the line of a poem in his ear:

And Sheridan twenty miles away.

He began to tremble. Around him Waterford was sleeping, but a great man had sent word through the night that he was coming to lead his cause.

When he came home at noon next day his mother was airing the spare bed-room. At supper Mr. Kerrigan sat with the family, and Steve hardly ate a mouthful. The man's black hair was wildly rumpled, his lean, tanned face was drawn with weariness, but the burning eyes were the eyes of one who would never cry quits. The talk ran all to politics.

"Perhaps I had better stay here until the end of the campaign," Mr. Kerrigan said. "I'll stump this valley from end to end. I'll make them see the issues. If the *Sentinel* had not decided to support Shields——" Suddenly he stopped short and turned to Mrs. Benton with a warm smile. "I'm afraid I am acting as though there was nothing in the world but my election worries."

HIGH BENTON

But Mrs. Benton told him that they were all deeply concerned. While she went to the kitchen for the coffee, he sat with a brooding look in his eyes.

"The *Sentinel's* stand makes it harder," he said abruptly; "not impossible."

Later, on his way back to the Hiding House with Mr. Benton, he paused in the hall to talk to Steve.

"My boy," he said, "you are almost of age. Study your country's history. It is the story of a people's struggle for liberty and justice. Learn to love that history. America is not perfect, but it is nearer perfect than any government that has ever been."

"I know that already," Steve said with fast-beating heart.

Mr. Kerrigan studied him intently. "Would to God more knew it," he said, and went out.

In the days that followed he went up and down the valley, speaking in halls, at cross-roads, in shops, mills and factories. But the air of gloom continued to hover over campaign headquarters at the Hiding House. At night, before starting on a speaking trip and while his workers argued and figured, Mr. Kerrigan would walk bare-headed back and forth along the wagon road, his hands clasped behind his back. From the clump of trees adjoining the road Steve would watch with a lump in his throat.

THE VOICE OF AMERICA

There came a night when Mr. Kerrigan spoke at the Waterford fire house. Steve bolted his supper and hurried off to be sure of a seat. One moment Mr. Kerrigan would be passionately eloquent; the next would find him blandly smiling as he drove home some deft point; and then he would grow coldly logical as he argued against some of the things Congressman Shields had done at Washington. Steve was entranced. He waited for the men to applaud, and when the handclapping was straggly and uncertain, his breath caught sharply. He could not stand this coldness. Minutes before the end he came away; and that night, from the trees, he once more watched his hero pace back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.

A week before Election Day, Congressman Shields paid another trip to the valley. He was to speak in Waterford on a Monday. Mr. Kerrigan had become more abstracted of late, and that night at the supper table he spoke but seldom.

"Going to hear the Congressman, Steve?" Mr. Benton asked.

"No," Steve said vehemently.

Mr. Kerrigan raised his eyes. "Always listen to both sides of an argument," he said gravely. "It is the only way to form an honest opinion."

Steve went to the meeting.

The fire house was crowded to the doors. Congressman Shields was fat, and soft, and mellow.

HIGH BENTON

He carried an air of hearty good fellowship, and seemed to expand and to take everybody into his confidence. His voice rolled down smoothly from the platform. He joked, he wheedled, he pooh-hooded. Steve, his brows knitted, drank in every word. Both sides of the argument! His brows knit the harder.

As soon as the Congressman finished he came away and went to the Hiding House. There he sat gingerly on the outskirts of the night's gathering. Reports had preceded him that the meeting had been one of the best of the campaign. Mr. Kerrigan was at one of the long tables, silent, grim. Half a dozen men folded letters and put them into addressed envelopes. Others spoke in suppressed whispers.

"What did you think of the meeting, Steve?" Mr. Benton asked idly.

"He was side-stepping," said Steve. "He didn't answer a single argument."

"What's that?" All the weariness was gone from Mr. Kerrigan's face. He sat upright in his chair. "What's that, boy?"

"He was ducking," said Steve. "He was dodging the issues. He didn't try to meet a single question."

Mr. Kerrigan's chair went over with a crash. The man was on his feet. "If a boy can see it," he cried, "do you think the voters will be blind?"

THE VOICE OF AMERICA

Isn't this what I have been telling you? Gentlemen, you give up too easily. Back to the fight. Our goal is still before us."

All in an instant the atmosphere of the Hiding House was changed. The talk grew animated, electric; and Steve, on his chair, was forgotten. By and by he came away, and went to the house and to bed. Long afterwards his father came to his door.

"Asleep, Steve?"

"No, sir."

"You have done a man's part to-night," his father said, and went to his own room.

The days that remained of the campaign were charged with a new spirit. The Saturday before the election found the Hiding House distinctly hopeful. Two more telephones were installed, and charts were prepared on which to record the vote as it would be sent in from all points of the district. The last man out that night nailed a horseshoe over the door.

"Not that I believe in signs," he said hastily, "but—— Well, it looks lucky."

No one came to the Hiding House on Sunday. Mr. Kerrigan, his body tired, his voice husky from much public speaking, went home for a rest. Monday there was a slight flurry during the day—last minute instructions to give, last minute letters to write. Monday night Mr. Tarkan came to the house.

HIGH BENTON

"Kerrigan back?" he asked.

"No," said Mr. Benton. "We told him to stay in bed for twenty-four hours. He needs it. He'll vote to-morrow, get some more rest during the early afternoon, and come here in the evening to receive the returns."

Mrs. Benton looked up from her sewing. "How will the election go?"

The two men shook their heads.

"We have made our fight," said Mr. Benton. "The public has its choice—a professional politician against a man of honor and courage."

Election Day dawned clear—the sort of day that always brings out a heavy vote. There was no school, and Steve went early to the Hiding House. But nobody was there save a young lawyer, yawning beside the telephones as he waited to give advice should any Kerrigan worker call for it. Steve looked about the empty room in surprise.

"Everybody's at the polls, sonny. Come around to-night—then you see excitement."

The Waterford election board was sitting in Dominic Caputo's barber shop near the railroad station. Steve walked around to the shop and looked in at the door. Along one wall were three booths with swinging doors. In the center of the room was a pine table and on it a box with glass sides. There were a few votes already in the box; and as Steve watched a man entered, gave his name, was

THE VOICE OF AMERICA

handed a ballot and stepped into one of the booths. Presently he came out, gave the ballot to an election clerk and gravely watched it deposited in the box.

Steve's muscles twitched. He had seen an American exercise the most sacred right of citizenship—a right for which men had been willing to die at Saratoga, at Valley Forge, at Yorktown.

"Here!" said a voice in his ear; "you can't loiter about a polling place. Run along with you."

He glanced up, recognized one of the town policemen, and moved across the street. There, leaning against a fence, he spent the whole morning. At noon he told his father that forty-eight people had voted.

"How do you know?" Mr. Benton asked sharply.

"I counted them."

"Forty-eight," his father repeated. "That's a good morning vote for Waterford. The people are interested. Does that mean Kerrigan has interested them, or are they swarming to Shields?" He sighed and ate silently.

All afternoon Steve leaned against the fence and watched the polling place. The sun went down behind the Waterford hills. Dusk crept across Snake river and through the Waterford streets. Over in the barber shop the oil lamps were lighted. A train came into the station from the city, and by and by a stream of men came up the street and formed a line inside the polling place. The voting would

HIGH BENTON

stop in about an hour. Steve walked rapidly toward home.

There was no smell of cooking food. The dining room table was not set. In the kitchen Mrs. Benton was making sandwiches to be sent to the Hiding House to refresh the men who would tabulate election returns through the night. One platter was already piled high.

"Only sandwiches, Steve," said his mother. "There's pie in the closet."

For once he wasn't interested in pie. He filled a glass with milk, took a sandwich, and stood beside the window, eating.

"Did Mr. Kerrigan come, mom?"

"Yes."

Steve ate a second sandwich and went back to his fence.

The voting had stopped. A knot of men were gathering some distance from the polling place, and inside the members of the election board kept glancing at the clock. Abruptly, when the hour was up, they roused to action, drew up chairs and arranged themselves about the table. The knot of men came forward quickly and pushed into the shop. Steve knew what that meant. The voting was over; they were now going to count the ballots. Mr. Kerrigan had either won or lost.

A half hour passed. One by one other men came along the street and went into the shop. The

THE VOICE OF AMERICA

policeman was not in sight. Gingerly Steve walked across the dark road. The barber shop seemed crowded to its limit. Nevertheless, as he looked, a space showed itself. He squirmed into the opening. No one paid any attention to him; no voice of authority ordered him to go away.

The polling place was hot and feverish. The air was blue with the smoke of dead cigars and pipes, and heavy with the odor of closely packed human bodies. Somebody else pushed through the doorway, and he found himself wedged so that he could not turn. All he could see was the back of the man ahead of him.

"Kerrigan!" a voice called.

"Four!" two voices answered in a chanting chorus.

Fear drove a sweat out on Steve's forehead. They had been counting the vote more than thirty minutes. Was this only the fourth vote Mr. Kerrigan had received?

"Kerrigan," called the voice again.

"Tally," came the droning answer.

"Kerrigan."

"One."

Steve understood. They were checking the votes in blocks of fives, and every fifth vote was called "tally."

"Shields."

"Three."

THE VOICE OF AMERICA

"Kerrigan."

"Two."

Kerrigan votes were coming out in greater number than Shields votes. Steve's chest rose and fell in a convulsive sigh.

He lost all sense of time, all sense of discomfort. The air grew fouler, and the kerosene lamps began to smoke—he did not know it. His back grew clammy, his legs grew numb—he did not feel it. Now and then there would be a sharp challenge of a ballot, an angry debate. The men would listen, tense; and when the argument was over they would break into quick, nervous talk and shift their positions. For a moment Steve would find relief—and not be conscious of that either. Then he would be packed in again, seeing nothing but a broad back, hearing nothing but those droning voices:

"Kerrigan."

"Three."

"Kerrigan."

"Four."

"Kerrigan."

"Tally."

"Kerrigan's running away with things here," said a voice. "Wonder how he's making out in the rest of the district?"

Breathlessly Steve drank it in, entranced, inspired, thrilled. The voice of America was speak-

THE VOICE OF AMERICA

ing. Every nerve in his body quivered in response to that voice.

"Last ballot," came a cry.

All at once the tension snapped. The crowded room began to surge and to find elbow room. Even as the voice called "Kerrigan" once more, Steve found himself forced backward. Now he was in the doorway, now he was partly in the street. Somebody said, "Kerrigan, 258; Shields, 49." A shrill cry of exultation broke from his lips. Those nearest the door, startled, turned to see what had happened—but the doorway was empty. A boy was running wildly down the street.

In from the dark road the boy swung at last, past a house, through a grove of trees and across an old wagon road. His hands fumbled for the latch of the Hiding House door; his impatient feet knocked against the panels. The door swung open. He was momentarily dazed by the light.

"Anything wrong, Steve?" Mr. Benton asked sharply.

"N—no, sir. The Waterford vote is all counted."

"How did it go?"

"Mr. Kerrigan got 258 and the Congressman got 49."

"Oh, baby!" cried an excited voice. "See that vote rolling up. Put it down, Sam."

"Sam" proved to be the young lawyer who Steve had seen that morning. He had discarded coat,

HIGH BENTON

collar and tie, and had charge of a chart that was almost full of figures. All along the table were other men with other charts. The floor was covered with torn and rumpled papers. Here and there were sandwiches, for all the world as though busy workers had picked them up and had forgotten to eat them.

A telephone rang.

"That may be Franklin Furnace," said Mr. Kerrigan. He sat off to one side alone, studying the returns that had thus far come in. He looked fresher, as though the two-day rest had revived him.

The call came from another end of the district inquiring as to the result.

"Kerrigan has a good lead in the southern end and has swept the Waterford valley," explained the man who had answered the ring. "The northern end we figure, will go to Shields, but unless he makes a tremendous run there he's beaten. We can't get any information from that end at all. Something's wrong with the telephone wires."

"Try Basking Ridge," said Mr. Kerrigan. "Try Cohaxie; try Warren Point. Some of those places may be able to get into communication with Franklin Furnace."

The campaign workers tried. Cohaxie knew nothing of the vote in the northern end. Basking Ridge did not answer. Warren Point reported that it had heard from one little northern village early

in the evening, but that since that time the wires had been dead. How had that village voted? Kerrigan, 6; Shields, 51.

"Eight to one," said Mr. Benton in an alarmed voice. "If Shields gets an 8 to 1 majority through the north we're licked."

Mr. Kerrigan's mouth tightened. "No use in trying to reach conclusions from the vote of one village," he said. "Franklin Furnace will know what the entire northern end has done. Keep after that call."

An hour passed, a restless, high-strung hour. Mr. Benton came over to where Steve sat.

"Sleepy?" he asked. "It's getting late."

Steve shook his head.

Suddenly one of the telephones rang, a shrill, insistent summons. Mr. Benton jumped to the instrument and lifted the receiver.

"Hello! What? Do we still want Franklin Furnace?" His voice went up a key. "Hurry it; hurry it." He turned to the others. "The Franklin Furnace wire is open again."

They crowded around him with a rush. Mr. Kerrigan half arose from his chair and then dropped back. The Hiding House grew deathly still.

"Hello!" Mr. Benton called at last. "Franklin Furnace Kerrigan Club? This is Kerrigan headquarters at Waterford. Yes. Yes; we've swept everything down here. How's the northern end

HIGH BENTON

gone? What? *What? Kerrigan and Shields are running almost even. Then we win; we win.*"

The Hiding House became a bedlam. Steve found himself swept from his feet, found himself cheering hoarsely, found himself standing at last in front of a tall, tired man whose face seemed transformed.

"Gentlemen," Mr. Kerrigan said in a voice that trembled, "gentlemen, the news is good, but it is not wholly a time of rejoicing. It is a time of responsibility. By your work you have helped to convince the public that a change was needed. You brought forth a candidate and you said 'Elect this man and he will represent you in truth and in honor.' And they have elected me on that promise." He raised one hand high above his head. "God helping me, gentlemen," he said solemnly, "I will keep it."

That was the picture that Steve carried in his soul for days: a great man standing squarely in the face of his responsibilities and pledging anew his course in the Congress of the United States.

CHAPTER XI

"NOT QUALIFIED"

TWO weeks after the election Elias Todd came back to Waterford. His return was as mysterious as had been his flitting. One day the Jitney Shop was shut up in mystery and seclusion; the next the door was open, and old Elias sat in the sunlight contentedly chewing his tobacco.

Steve saw him sitting there, and paused abruptly. The old man wore a dark suit that was evidently new—but already it was baggy from careless handling and in acute need of a brushing. His derby was dented at one side. Genially he greeted those who passed up and down the street; but whereas in former days he had always bowed and scraped and wheedled, now he addressed himself to his acquaintances with careless independence. Steve watched for awhile, and finally retraced his steps and went home another way.

He told himself that he ought to have visited Mr. Todd for a few moments at least if only to say hello—but he couldn't. Never again would the Jitney Shop be anything more to him than a place

of confusion and neglect, a tomb in which lay the wreck of a man's wasted life. Nor could he think of Mr. Todd without seeming to hear the old man's cackle of a laugh and his quavering voice denouncing all the bright things that spelled ambition and advancement. Even yet Steve blushed to think that he had once accepted this disreputable philosophy as gospel, that he had once been of a stripe with Hub Morgan and Gabby Watson. But in the last few months he had come to know such real men as Mr. Frost, Mr. Lane, Aaron Todd and Mr. Kerrigan. His feet had found a new path; his heart had found a new ideal.

The reopened Jitney Shop did very little business. That much was patent to all Waterford. Men who had been in the habit of going there with small jobs had found new avenues of service while the shop had been closed. Elias Todd did not seem to worry. Had he kept his mouth shut the village would never have known the secret of his contentment, but old 'Lias had never been one to keep his own counsel. Gradually he let his status become known. He had found the routine of his brother's home too exacting. In the end he had come back to the shop that was more to his liking, secure in the knowledge that Aaron, the worthless, had settled a modest pension upon him.

"The chances are," said Gregor Helsing, "that he doesn't appreciate that pension a bit."

“He’s a funny old goat, isn’t he?” said Will Adams.

Gregor shook his head. “He means all right; he doesn’t know any better. He had his chance and threw it over.”

“What chance?” Steve asked curiously.

“Education,” said Gregor. “He and Aaron had the same opportunities, but Elias wouldn’t use his.”

“My father says,” Will Adams told them, “that education is like a tool—it’s up to you what use you make of it.”

“My father——” Gregor paused. “I may have some news for you fellows in a day or two.”

But the Waterford *Sentinel* carried the news before Gregor could tell it. Mr. Helsing had patented an invention that added strength and durability to farm machinery, and the Tarkan-Boylert Company had bought the patent from him.

Steve was strangely moved. Here was a story of pluck, of battle against odds, of success. He could picture Mr. Helsing working nights in the little shop in the rear of his house, and carrying on his experiments in O’Brien’s machine shop and of being abused by Mr. O’Brien when the experiments failed. But the struggling inventor in his patient, plodding way, had kept on—and in the end had come this triumph.

The triumphant was reflected in Gregor. For once his quiet seemed to have deserted him—his

voice trembled a bit when he talked. Walking home slowly from school he told Steve and Will Adams the story.

"My father has always had engineering instinct," Gregor said, "but he got very little education. In the old country times were hard. He had to go to work early. Then, when he came to America, he was kept busy earning a living, learning new ways, mastering a new language. The idea of his invention has been in his head for years. He had the right idea from the start. But he didn't have education and he couldn't carry it through. One day I told Mr. Lane——"

"That's what Mr. Lane was doing that day in your father's shop," Steve cried suddenly.

Gregor laughed. "Do you remember how I tried to get rid of you that day? Mr. Lane thought there was something in the idea, and we were afraid that Mr. O'Brien would claim it if he thought it would amount to something in the end. There's something in the law that says that an employer has a claim upon an invention made by one of his men—something like that, anyway. Mr. O'Brien had ordered my father to be done with the engine, but we were afraid he would make a fresh claim if he thought there was a chance of success. Mr. Lane went to see Mr. Tarkan——"

"Oh!" said Steve beginning to see light.

Gregor nodded. "That's how my father came to

go to work for the Tarkan-Boylert people. They perfected his invention. He couldn't. He could carry it only so far. He lacked education.”

There was that magic word again!

“My father loves America,” Gregor went on, “for the opportunities it gives to men. In the old country he would have plodded on as he was, and I would have followed in his steps. By this time I would have been at work. Here in America I am still at school. Sometimes I think that American-born boys do not realize all that their country means.”

“I never thought of it that way before,” Will Adams said soberly. “You can bet I'm going to learn things and be a somebody.”

“It is so easy,” said Gregor, “to amount to something if you want to.”

That, however, was not the thought that Steve took home with him. The picture that held his imagination was a vision of Mr. Lane limping down to Smoky Hollow to aid a harassed man he did not even know. Teachers, evidently, did not concern themselves only with boys. Anybody who wanted to go ahead could count on them for help. How strange it was that some people tried so hard to advance—and others were content to stand still.

“I hear old Todd is home again,” his father said that night.

Steve nodded.

HIGH BENTON

"Been to see him?"

"No, sir." He looked up to find his father smiling, and a slow, answering smile crossed his lips. They seemed to understand each other thoroughly. There were many evidences, of late, of the man-to-man bond that had grown between them. His father had left word at the newsdealer's that a newspaper was to be left for him each morning. And he now had free access to his father's private library of serious books. Most of them were biographies. He had developed a passionate desire to read the lives of men who had come out of the valleys and had climbed to the mountain tops. All of these men—all—had thirsted for the things that are found in books.

He carried this spirit into his work. But slowly, as the days ran on, a stumbling block rose in his path and robbed him of some of his zest. There were three girls in his class to every boy. He had resented this before, at first feebly, then with a growing intensity of antagonism. Now he was filled with a boyish, high-strung impatience.

In bookkeeping, he admitted reluctantly, the girls showed marked ability. But in chemistry—— He sighed dismally.

"I don't see why they give girls chemistry," Will Adams said in sympathy.

"They're always afraid of getting a drop of this or a drop of that on their aprons," Steve com-

plained. “They hold test tubes and things as though they had teeth and would bite. We could get some place if it wasn’t for them.”

“And the questions they ask!” Will sighed.

Oh, yes! the questions. But it was worse in political economy. Here was the subject that lay nearest to Steve’s heart. He had passed through a campaign and had viewed it intimately. He had known a candidate personally. He had attended political meetings, had lived for weeks in a lively political atmosphere, and had sat at campaign headquarters through the feverish hours of an election night. The inability of the girls to understand things that were crystal clear to him caused him to squirm in his seat. In truth, Will Adams and the other boys of his class were scarcely any better informed—but he did not notice that.

Hungry for knowledge, he chafed at restraint. At this particular time learning to him was a crusade, a sacred cause. When his soaring spirit met delays he fell into dark and bitter moods. His boat had long ago been taken from Snake river and up to the Hiding House, and when these moods came upon him he roamed the shores of the stream, now desolate and barren with the approach of winter, and asked himself what was the use. There was one period when he did not open a book for a week.

He no longer took commercial geography and

HIGH BENTON

commercial history. He had left Mr. Frost's class behind. But from time to time he dropped into the teacher's room and talked freely as he would have talked to another boy. He wandered into the room during that week of discouragement.

"Steve," said the teacher, "you can't fool me. I know you too well. There's something on your mind. Let's drag it out into the light. I have an idea you're not studying."

Steve nodded.

"Why?"

Steve told him, a bit defiantly, for it suddenly came to him that the man might think him egotistical and self-important. But Mr. Frost listened to what he said in grave silence. Then:

"Steve, how many are in your class?"

"Twenty-eight, sir."

"Twenty-eight! Some are very bright and find the work easy. Some find it just hard enough to compel them to strive earnestly. Some find it exceedingly hard and must dig and grope for the light. All twenty-eight have a right to whatever knowledge is to be imparted to them. If twenty-seven were neglected so that one very bright pupil could push ahead more rapidly——"

Steve's face grew red. "I'm not claiming I'm the brainy one of the class."

Mr. Frost patted his shoulder. "I know it, Steve. But your thoughts have run a bit deeper than theirs

“NOT QUALIFIED”

have. You have found a goal and you're reaching for it. The man with a goal in view always travels fastest. Perhaps they have not yet found theirs. But, Steve, remember this: things learned hurriedly are usually forgotten just as quickly. One fact learned at a time and that learned well is the secret of knowledge. It does you no good to scratch your head and say you knew this or that at one time. You must know it when the call comes for just that knowledge." The man's face broke into a smile. "Does that clear your problem?"

"A—a little," Steve said doubtfully.

From the class-room window Mr. Frost watched him as he walked toward home. "A boy in years," the teacher said under his breath, "but a man in thought and impatient to do a man's part."

After that Steve stuck to his books through sheer grit. Much of the high flavor with which he had started the term was gone. He might have fallen away sadly were it not that his mind kept painting pictures of Gabby Watson serving crullers and coffee in a lunch wagon and Freckles Smith selling sweets with a small circus.

Christmas passed, and January came to Waterford. That was a grueling month. For days there was sleet and ice. The streets, deserted save for those who hurried about their business, was gray with trodden snow; the trees were shiveringly bleak. There were times when the high school fur-

HIGH BENTON

nace would not draw properly and the class-rooms were draughty and dreary—days, too, when Mr. Lane's face was crippled as though the cold struck cruelly at his crippled leg. Men fell sick. The newspaper that came to Steve each morning spoke of "epidemic." Sometimes he would see a funeral going through the street.

"Mr. Todd's sick," Gregor said one morning when Steve met him on the school steps.

"Cold?" Steve asked.

"I'm afraid it's more than a cold."

Steve looked at him in surprise. "Have you been there?"

"Yes. He talks about the old crowd a lot—says that nobody comes to visit him any more. Gabby and Hub are working, I'm in school, you don't go there any more, very few people bring him any work—I imagine he finds it pretty lonesome holed up in the Jitney Shop like a hermit."

"I guess so," Steve said weakly.

All that day his conscience reproached him. When his mind should have been on his books he was thinking, instead, of the day that old 'Lias had saved him the piece of cake, and of the night he lay threatened with pneumonia and the old man had brought him cough drops——

"But he's always poking ridicule at Mr. Lane and at schools and—and at everything," Steve argued defensively.

“NOT QUALIFIED ”

Nevertheless he knew what he ought to do—and he knew what he would do. He would go to the Jitney Shop again when school was over for the day. But when he came home at three o'clock a message was waiting for him. Mr. Todd was sick, his mother told him, and had sent a boy to the house to say that he wanted to see Stevie.

“Now he'll think,” Steve said, “that I would not have gone if he hadn't sent for me.”

“Were you going?” his mother asked.

He nodded absently. “He came to see me when I was sick,” he explained.

“Perhaps,” his mother said, “if I wrap a glass of jelly——”

So Steve left the house with the jelly in his overcoat pocket. The thought that Mr. Todd might be seriously ill did not bother him in the least. Mr. Todd had complained so often of his bad heart but had nevertheless gone on so serenely from month to month that he had long ago ceased to be an object of concern. Steve half expected to find him sitting huddled over the stove, chewing his tobacco and ready to announce that he had a “han-kerin' for somethin' tasty.”

But the moment he stepped inside the Jitney House he realized, with a sense of fright, that something was really wrong. The place had a sick-room smell and a sick-room hush. Mr. Todd was not in sight. A woman from the town was brewing

HIGH BENTON

something hot and medicinny at the stove. She came toward Steve on tip-toes with her finger to her lips.

"You can't see Mr. Todd," she whispered. "He's very sick."

Steve's eyes searched the place.

"He's in the little bed-room. He must be kept very quiet."

"But he sent for me," Steve told her in an answering whisper.

"Oh! Then you must be the Benton boy." She looked at him doubtfully. "He's been calling for you when he's out of his head. Maybe it will rest him to see you for a few minutes."

"Is he that bad?" Steve asked in dismay.

The woman looked serious, and shook her head, and led him back toward the little room where the old man, for years, had slept in a disordered bed. "Not for long," she whispered again, and stood aside so that he could enter.

He caught his breath. There was no question but that Mr. Todd was sick. His face was of a grayish color, and the straggly whiskers seemed wan and drooping. He lay there with his face turned toward the door, but the eyes were closed. Steve might have thought that he was asleep were it not that one hand lying on the bed covers, now smooth and in order, kept up a ceaseless twitching.

"Mr.—Mr. Todd," Steve faltered.

The old man's eyes opened. They were dead

“NOT QUALIFIED”

eyes, lusterless eyes, tired eyes, with a far-away look in them. He tried to reach out his hand but the effort was too much. Steve took the hand, and the sick man sighed.

“I said you’d come to old ’Lias, Stevie,” he said weakly. “You ain’t been comin’ around much, has you? Maybe you was busy. You wasn’t mad at old ’Lias, Stevie?”

Something stung Steve’s eyes and made them blink. He shook his head.

“Old ’Lias always liked you, Stevie, better’n anybody, better’n Greggie. You never was one to boss old ’Lias. Last time Hubbie was in he called me out o’ my name—called me a old fool.” The old man sighed again and muttered: “Maybe, maybe.” And after a moment he spoke again. “You’d a never said that to old ’Lias, Stevie.”

Steve bit his lips. Gone was the old cackling laughter and the peppery defiance of school and authority. The spent, old man who lay there was as helpless as a babe. The room grew quiet. Mr. Todd closed his eyes. The woman looked in at the door. That gray-faced figure on the bed began to speak again, this time breathlessly, a little wildly.

“His mind’s wandering,” said the woman. “He goes off like that and then he comes back.”

“You let that there stew alone, Gabbie,” the sick man cried, “you leave some o’ that for Stevie. Tee,

HIGH BENTON

hee! That's the way for high-steppin' boys to do. No high-falutin' teachers— What's that you are saying, Gabbie? Stevie ain't got no more use for—— You wasn't mad at old 'Lias, was you, Stevie? I always liked you better'n anybody else."

The voice trailed off and grew quiet. Steve caught his breath. By and by the tired eyes opened again.

"Stevie! Old 'Lias thought maybe he was only dreamin' you was here. Old 'Lias was plannin' for to have a big stewed chicken, Stevie—but you didn't come."

"I—I brought you some jelly, Mr. Todd," Steve said, and took the glass from his pocket.

But the eyes regarded the jelly dully. The head moved from side to side a little. The lips formed a wan smile.

"Old 'Lias won't eat no more victuals. Old 'Lias's time—has come. No more cookin', Stevie, and no sittin' outside in the sun. Last night a dog was a-howlin'."

"My dog howled when I was sick, Mr. Todd." Steve's voice sounded as it had never sounded before. "You'll be better in no time."

The hand that held his tightened its grip a little.

"Stevie!" The voice was a whisper. "Stevie, was you a church boy?"

"Yes, sir."

"Old 'Lias never went to church. Wish I had;

wish I had. Don't you ever stop—you listen to old 'Lias. It's a powerful comfort when you comes to die.”

“You're not going to die, Mr. Todd. Don't you lose your courage and——”

But the old man seemed not to hear him. The lips moved.

“He wants to say something to you,” said the woman.

Steve bent down his head.

“Stevie!” The voice was now so faint that he could scarcely hear it. “Does you know any prayers, Stevie?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You're a good boy, Stevie. Say a little prayer for old 'Lias. Little prayer—little prayer——” The voice trailed off again. The woman touched Steve on the shoulder.

“You must come away. It isn't good for him to talk so much. Maybe I shouldn't have let you in.”

Blindly Steve stumbled home. His mother saw him come in, glanced at his face and asked no questions. He remained in his room until called for supper. He had no appetite and merely toyed with his food.

“Is old Todd very sick?” his father asked.

Steve nodded, but did not lift his eyes from his plate.

After supper his father went out. He tried to

HIGH BENTON

study; but though he looked at the pages of the books, all he saw was a worn figure on a bed pleading with him to say that he wasn't mad. He went up to bed and lay there in the darkness unable to sleep. And by and by his father came in.

Steve heard him hang his overcoat on the hall rack. His voice sounded guardedly:

"Mother!"

He heard his mother come from the kitchen.

"Where's Steve?" his father asked.

"Upstairs. I think he went to bed."

His father's voice became even more guarded—and yet he heard it. "Old Todd is dead."

He turned his head to the wall and sobbed.

Three days later they buried Elias Todd from Mr. McNally's undertaking parlors. They dug a grave for him in the frozen ground on a hill overlooking the town in which he had passed his days. And then they came away, the handful of people who had followed his casket, and rode back to town.

Aaron Todd had come to Waterford for the funeral; he went home that same night. Thunder-struck, Steve saw his father greet this man as an old friend. Suddenly he began to put two and two together. His father was a commission merchant and probably handled Mr. Todd's business. His father, instead of putting his advertisement for work in a newspaper, had probably written to the farmer. His father was well aware of his destina-

tion that summer morning he had set out for Mountain View. Everything became clear—why his father had known so much about old 'Lias and why Aaron Todd had been aware of the things his brother had said of him.

Steve and his father walked to the station with Mr. Todd when he went to get his train. On the way they passed the Jitney Shop.

“There was good stuff in him,” Mr. Todd said sadly. “He wouldn’t knowingly have done harm to any living thing. He never did a dishonest action in his life—and very few wise ones. As a boy he started wild. Authority and restraint chafed him, and he came in the end to this—a wasted life and a melancholy end. Good stuff alone is not enough—it must be cultivated.” He turned to Steve. “Did you see much of him after you came back?”

Steve’s lips trembled. “No, sir. He—he liked me. He kept calling for me. I think he was hurt——”

“There!” Mr. Todd said gently. “You must not take it to heart. He took the wrong road; you cannot blame yourself for taking another.”

But Steve could not be comforted. When he passed the darkened Jitney Shop on the way back he seemed to catch the familiar smell of something cooking on the stove.

HIGH BENTON

"A wasted life," said his father. "The pity of it."

That was it. The pity of it! Old 'Lias had had as much opportunity as Aaron. Before the end he must have felt regret—at least Steve thought so. He had spoken of church. He had asked for a prayer—— In the hallway of his own home Steve brushed past his father and went to his room. There he knelt beside the bed, and once more the tears came.

For many days thereafter he was quiet, thoughtful and preoccupied. This was the first time that anybody close to his life had died, and he was filled with a dark melancholy. He studied, he recited in the class-room, but he did it all dully and without enthusiasm. Early in March Mr. Kerrigan came to the house for a visit. Mr. Kerrigan was not tired now, or harassed; his mind was full of plans for the future. For three days Steve sat at his feet and drank in all he said. In those three days the morbidness left him. The old ambition returned. Like a sleeper freshly awakened, he was eager to be off, to make progress, to forge ahead.

And again, before long, he found himself rebelling at delays that checked his headlong flight. Once Will Adams said to him, "Girls don't take to political economy like boys. My father knows lots more about public questions than my mother. Men have always been in politics." To which Steve re-

plied fiercely, “Girls and boys ought to be in separate classes.”

That expression started a new train of thought. When he went to work for the Tarkan-Boylert Company and joined their class he would be working solely with men. His eyes sparkled.

“We might as well make the best of things while we’re here,” Will Adams said with an air of serious wisdom.

Steve nodded absently. He was thinking of that class the Tarkan-Boylert Company conducted. It seemed to suggest possibilities.

Coming on to June he began to get a disturbing vision of what lay ahead. Some of the boys of his class would not come back. One by one he checked their names. Why—why—— He laid the pencil down. Only five boys at most would return for the senior year. There would be about nineteen girls—— He sat brooding in his seat until Miss Cooper called him to recite.

Nineteen girls and only five boys! He carried the thought home with him mulling it over as he walked alone through the spring-clad Waterford streets. And Gregor Helsing, his closest friend, would have graduated. Except for Will Adams, next year he would be practically alone. What was the use of going on?

It was the first time this thought had come to him. Thereafter it was more or less with him at all

HIGH BENTON

times. Carrying his boat back to Snake river with Gregor Helsing's help it suddenly rose to plague him. Sailing up the river in the days that followed, or fishing quietly over the side, it would all at once present itself for fresh consideration. From the river he could see the smoke screen that lay over Smoky Hollow. He was impatient to be there doing his work. Just how much real difference would one short year less of high school make?

There were times when he tried desperately to banish the temptation. He tried to turn his thoughts into other channels by frolicking with Tramp after the old manner, but Tramp seemed to have reached a sedate age. When he barked now, he barked decorously. He showed a liking for lazy ways and shady places. He seemed symbolic of the change that had come to all former things to rob them of past flavors.

Examinations aroused Steve only mildly. The tests seemed to him ridiculously easy. He was sure that his average would be well over 80 per cent.

The day the last paper was turned in he found Gregor Helsing standing on the sidewalk and staring hard at the school building.

"You know," Gregor said candidly, "I'm just a little sorry I'm leaving. I've had four fine years."

Steve made no reply to that. "What are you going to do?"

“I’m going with the Tarkan-Boylert Company. I saw Mr. Tarkan yesterday.”

Instead of going directly home, Steve directed his steps up the old wagon road and sat for a long time in the door-way of the Hiding House. This place had been his refuge in the old days; it was his refuge now. There was no question of what he wanted. His desire was to be with Gregor. At the Tarkan-Boylert plant he would be among men, in a man’s atmosphere. They conducted a class. He could study. He could take up Spanish and prepare himself for the career on which his mind was set. The South American field still kindled his imagination. He still thrilled at the thought of carrying the tools of civilization into far places. Would it make any difference whether he studied at his work or whether he studied in school, whether he substituted a craftsman’s bench for a schoolboy’s desk?

After supper that night he went to the porch and waited until his father came out.

“I—I think I’d rather go to work than go back to school,” he said uneasily.

“Isn’t this rather sudden?” his father asked after a silence.

“I have been thinking about it for a long time.”

“Tell me your reasons, Steve.”

The boy tried to explain—just as he had tried to explain his point of view to Mr. Frost.

HIGH BENTON

"You mean you don't think you'd get enough out of another year," his father interrupted him.

"That's it," Steve answered eagerly. "I don't mean I'm tired of studying. They have classes at the Tarkan-Boylert plant, and——"

"Oh! You plan to work there?"

"Yes, sir."

His father strode up and down the length of the porch. "Steve," he said presently, "I think you've been spoiled. You've been mixed up in Mr. Kerrigan's campaign, and it has made you impatient of people your own age. You don't mean to let it happen, but you're letting your head pop up. You think you know more than you really do know. You've seen what education builds, and you've seen the wrecks that come from lack of it."

"I'm not trying to cut away from studying," Steve argued in his own defense.

In the twilight he thought his father's face softened. "I know that. It's the best thing in this whole situation. You're doing what you think is the best thing. You're honest about it, and if you find you're wrong you'll be honest about that. You're at the high-strung, restless age."

Steve shook his head. "It isn't that."

"No? Well, we'll see. I'm going to let you have your fling."

"It isn't a fling," Steve protested. "It's my life work."

“NOT QUALIFIED”

“We’ll see,” said his father again.

Several times that night he caught his father studying him, half questioningly, half anxiously. But his anticipation and his satisfaction were running too high to permit him a moment of regret. In the morning he went early to school and waited outside the building; and when Gregor appeared, he caught him excitedly by the arm.

“I’m going to be with you,” he cried. “I’m going to work for the Tarkan-Boylert Company.”

Gregor’s eyes lit up. “It will be fine; we’ll be together all summer.”

“I’m going to work for good,” said Steve.

The light in Gregor’s eyes dried. “Do you mean you’re quitting high school?”

Steve became nettled. Coming from another boy, the question annoyed him.

“It isn’t a crime, is it?” he demanded.

“No,” said Gregor; “it isn’t. But it ought to be. I wonder what Mr. Frost and Mr. Lane will say. You haven’t told them, have you?”

Steve could not control the flush that ran up into his cheeks. He hadn’t told them, and he didn’t intend to tell them. The reason for this he did not allow himself to dwell on. He had left home with the expectation that Gregor would welcome his changed plans. Instead Gregor had nipped his animation as a cold wind nips a budding flower.

HIGH BENTON

"Just as though I didn't intend to keep on studying," Steve grumbled.

Now that he knew what he intended to do he was impatient to take the plunge. The school year was practically over; the classes were merely keeping step and waiting to hear how the examinations had gone. A missed period meant nothing. Steve decided to see Mr. Tarkan that afternoon.

He went confidently to the plant. Had his errand been in any other quarter, he would have been anxious; but Mr. Tarkan was his father's friend, and had on many occasions taken dinner at the house. Though he did not stop to think in terms of what some boys call "pull" and "drag," nevertheless he felt that he would have a little the inside track.

It was the first time he had been in Smoky Hollow since the day he had gone on the errand to Gregor's house for Mr. Todd. He did not notice the house as he passed it. Had he been more observant he would have seen a sign reading "To Let," and that would have told him that the Hel-sings intended to move out of the smoke and grime to a brighter part of Waterford.

There were two entrances to the brick factory building. One was marked "Employees." One, directly on the corner, was marked "Office." He chose this entrance. Inside he found a hall that was almost like a room. There were chairs along

“NOT QUALIFIED”

the wall, a table holding some technical magazines, and an alert young woman at a desk. She took his name, wrote it on a printed blank, summoned a boy and gave him the paper. Presently the boy came back, spoke to the woman, and she nodded to Steve and smiled. He followed the boy through a busy general office back to Mr. Tarkan's private quarters.

The place awed Steve. It was a square room, with windows on two sides, furnished almost as though it were a library. The rug on the floor was soft and rich. The pictures on the walls spoke of value even to his inexperienced eyes. The chairs were heavy and massive, solid and polished. But in spite of all the richness the room carried an air of industry, too. Mr. Tarkan's desk, up near the front windows, was crowded with neat piles of papers. There were filing cabinets in a corner. At his elbow a secretary worked nimble fingers over a typewriter keyboard. And swinging from the side of the desk were two substantial, business looking telephones.

“Well, Steve,” Mr. Tarkan greeted him heartily, “what brings you in here?”

“I'm looking for a job,” said Steve.

“And you want to work for us? Good! I think we'll be glad to have you. I heard some good reports about you last summer. You met one of our men in the country——”

HIGH BENTON

"Oh, yes, sir," Steve said eagerly. He had forgotten the man's name, but his heart warmed.

"Yes," said Mr. Tarkan, "he sent us a letter. You told him you were coming to work here some day, and he advised us about you. That's a way our men have—everything for the firm. Will you please get me that Benton letter, Miss Joyce?"

The secretary went noiselessly to the filing cabinet, and returned with several sheets of writing.

"Whenever we hear of a boy who speaks of coming here we like to keep an eye on him," Mr. Tarkan went on. He held the letter in his hands. "I hope you'll like it here, Steve."

"I know I will," Steve answered. How easy the whole business had been!

"Well, that's a good spirit to start with. I didn't know this was your graduation year."

"It isn't." In spite of the effort Steve made, his voice weakened.

"Oh! Then you mean to work here just for the summer—breaking in as it were for next year."

"No," said Steve; "I'm coming here for good."

At that the friendliness seemed to go out of Mr. Tarkan's face. He seemed to freeze. Even his voice was changed.

"That makes a difference," he said slowly. "You want to come to us, of course, with no intention of staying all your life at a work-bench?"

Steve nodded.

“NOT QUALIFIED”

“Your ambition is to build up and become one of the big men of the firm?”

“Yes, sir.”

Mr. Tarkan shook his head. “It’s been our experience that you can’t build a big man out of a small boy, no more than a contractor can erect a building without digging a foundation. A boy must have a certain something to start with, and that something must come up to specifications. We expect him to have certain qualities of education. We have been employing boys for a good many years. We know from our experience what to expect. Our experience has shown us that a boy who lacks a high school education doesn’t come to us with the necessary foundation. We can’t build on the boy who won’t study.”

“But I’ll study in your classes here,” Steve said eagerly.

Mr. Tarkan regarded him gravely. “Could you enter college next fall?”

“No, sir.”

“Why, not?”

“I’d first have to take my last high school year.”

“This is the Tarkan-Boylert college, Steve. It graduates Tarkan-Boylert men, the type of men who have made this business what it is to-day. It’s graded to carry on a boy from his high school senior year. How could you make it without that year?”

HIGH BENTON

Steve sat silent. He had been as sure of employment as he was of his own name.

"Our man who reported to you——" Mr. Tarkan read the letter to himself, puckering his lips and blowing through them softly. "He calls you here a boy of great common sense. By the way, are you leaving school of your own accord?"

"Y—yes, sir."

Mr. Tarkan folded the letter back in its original creases. "I'm afraid our man didn't judge you accurately. You can't build without bricks, and you can't make bricks without straw. You can't keep a business healthy without taking in boys and developing them to carry it on, but you can't develop boys who lack the things that are necessary. We couldn't build good Tarkan-Boylert machines if we allowed the mills to send us inferior steel. We must insist upon a certain standard. We can't make good Tarkan-Boylert men out of inferior boys. It doesn't pay us to try. That's business."

"But," Steve began lamely, "I thought that if I studied very hard——"

"I'm sorry, Steve," Mr. Tarkan said with an air of finality. "It doesn't pay."

Five minutes later he was climbing the hill that led out of Smoky Hollow. He had been inspected and labeled "Not qualified."

CHAPTER XII

STEVE FINDS THE ROAD

THERE was no spring or vim in Steve's steps as he walked home. He got out the clippers to trim the hedge, looked at it aimlessly, and took it back to the cellar. Next he brought forth the lawn mower but put it away without touching the lawn. He went around to the Hiding House as one goes to an old friend in trouble, and dropped into his old seat in the doorway facing the wagon road.

It was not yet two o'clock when he came to rest there; the sun had gone far into the west before he stirred. Voices, coming from the other side of the road, told him that his father was home. He went toward the house and found his father spraying the rose bushes in front of the porch.

"I saw Mr. Tarkan to-day," he said.

Mr. Benton nodded. "Everything go all right?"

"No, sir. He wouldn't give me a job. Said I didn't measure up to standard."

"Why?"

"Because I hadn't graduated from high school."

HIGH BENTON

The boy's voice grew bitter. "You and Mr. Tarkan have been friends, too."

"Is that how you expect to make good—on favors?" his father asked quietly. "That's isn't like you, Steve."

His face grew hot; his voice became low. "I didn't really mean—— He could have given me some consideration."

"Did he say why he couldn't take you on?"

"He said it didn't pay—that it wasn't business."

"He must have given you consideration, Steve, to arrive at that conclusion. And as for friendship—— Mr. Tarkan has a great many friends. Suppose they all sent their sons to him, and suppose none of these boys were qualified, and suppose he took them all on the payroll out of friendship. What sort of farm machinery do you think the Tarkan-Boylert Company would be making in about ten years?"

Steve stared down at the bushes.

"The boy who goes out to work goes out to sell his services," his father went on. "You had something to offer that Mr. Tarkan could not use. Had you been better qualified—— There, Steve! I'm not going to preach school to you. To-day, to-morrow, all your life, you'll find that the better qualified you are the better your chances of success. Of course you can always sell shoddy goods, but you'll soon discover that shoddy goods are sold at a shoddy

STEVE FINDS THE ROAD

place at a shoddy price. I'd aim a bit higher than shoddy if I were you."

"I'll show them I can get along," Steve blustered. His pride had been grievously hurt and was still smarting.

"You'll show whom?" his father asked sharply. He said nothing.

"I never knew you to be a whiner," Mr. Benton said in a calmer tone. "If you're going to start with the idea that Mr. Tarkan has done you an injustice your cause is lost already. You'll never get any place that way. If you want to sell something and it isn't good enough, the thing to do is to make it better."

"You're saying that so I'll go back to school."

"No, Steve," Mr. Benton said gently. "If you don't know the value of education by this time it wouldn't do you any good to go back."

Steve knew well enough, but his heart was filled with unreasonable stubbornness. He could find a job; he would find a job. After the fashion of youth, his mind began to build its castles. In the job he found he would make good. He would win such a signal success that promotion would come rapidly. Men in the business world would remark him. Mr. Tarkan, sitting in his luxurious office, would ponder the fact that he had had a chance to employ Steve Benton—but had let the chance slip. At last he would declare that the Tarkan-Boylert

HIGH BENTON

Company just had to have the services it had once refused. And so Mr. Tarkan would write to him, and——

He roused himself from this delightful dream to more practical things. The thing for him to do, of course, was to attach himself to a firm that did machinery work. The Tarkan-Boylert Company would never send for him, of course, unless he was doing a work akin to theirs. He congratulated himself a bit smugly, that he had had the foresight to see this. Of the other machine shops in Waterford——

And again he came to an abrupt pause. The only other shop that did machine work was the one owned by Mr. O'Brien, the place where his old crony Hub Morgan was employed.

Had anybody told Steve, a week ago, that he would have even thought of going to work there, he would have answered with a scornful glare. But he had to find employment in a machine shop, and going to the O'Brien shop was expedient. He had heard Mr. Frost use that word on one occasion. He rolled it on his tongue. Expedient! It furnished him with an excuse, with justification for what he was about to do.

Next day the examination averages were announced. He had passed with a mark of 85 per cent.

"That doesn't look as though I've lost ambi-

STEVE FINDS THE ROAD

tion," he told himself. Bit by bit he was twisting the scene in Mr. Tarkan's office until in his own mind he took the viewpoint that his industry and faith had been attacked.

The morning of the second day he went down to Smoky Hollow again. The O'Brien place was a one-storied frame structure with a corrugated iron roof painted a vivid red. Iron in all forms and shapes was piled outside rusting until such time as it would be needed. When he went inside from the bright sunlight he appeared to enter a recess that was dark and gloomy. His eyes made out vague shapes moving about in this gloom. His ears were assailed with the rapid clicking of some machines, the heavy pounding of others, and a high-pitched screaming as pieces of metal were cut into shapes.

By and by, as his eyes threw off the shock of passage from strong sunlight into the weak illumination indoors, he saw that men and boys, in grease-streaked overalls, were working at the various machines. One row of machines near where he stood was entirely manned by boys and young men. He was a bit surprised that they paid him no attention. But he understood their studied indifference better when one boy, stopping work to stare at him in frank interest, was roundly abused for idleness by a powerful, overbearing, red-haired man who had come walking down the space in the

HIGH BENTON

rear of the machines. The boy jumped back to his task.

Steve approached the red-haired man. He wished he could ask somebody else, but nobody else seemed near. Besides, this man appeared to have some authority.

"Can you tell me where I can find Mr. O'Brien?"

"I'm O'Brien," the man said shortly. "What do you want?"

"A job," Steve answered. The words had almost been frightened out of his mouth. This aggressive, head-strong, head-long type of business man was new to him.

Mr. O'Brien spread his legs, put his hands on his hips, drew back a step and surveyed him. "What can you do?" he demanded.

And Steve faltered: "Nothing." He had come here feeling that this was a sort of come down for him; now he was acutely afraid that even here he would find nothing to which he could turn his hand. Every place, apparently, even here, they wanted people who could do something or who knew something.

The man waved his arms in a temper. "Great Heavens!" he cried; "don't boys know anything any more? Are all boys dunces? What have we got schools for? Am I supposed to take a lot of half-baked ignoramuses and make something of them?"

STEVE FINDS THE ROAD

Where does my business get off? Where do I get off? Didn't they teach you anything at school?"

"I can do bookkeeping and business correspondence," Steve said hastily.

"Why didn't you say so? Can't you understand English? Are you stupid?"

"I didn't think of it," Steve stammered. "I don't want to do that kind of work. I want to learn something mechanical."

"Well," Mr. O'Brien said somewhat mollified, "I don't want any office help. Too many dudes around here now. If you don't mind dirtying your hands you can come in and make yourself useful for six dollars a week."

"When shall I come?" Steve asked.

"Monday. The whistle blows at seven o'clock. That means seven o'clock. If you can't get in on time stay home. Too many lazy loafers around here now. Did they kick you out of school or are you leaving?"

"I'm leaving."

"Got any idea of becoming an inventor?" Mr. O'Brien asked blackly.

"No, sir."

"I want no inventors. Had one here, and he used up my good time and then sold me out." Mr. O'Brien broke into an angry outburst spiced here and there with profanity. Steve knew that he was speaking about Mr. Helsing. Abruptly the man

HIGH BENTON

stopped short. "Well, what are you loafing around here for? I told you to come Monday, didn't I?"

Steve departed hurriedly. One of the boys at the row of machines gave him a fleeting, vindictive grin. He recognized Hub Morgan.

He had a job, but his spirit was depressed. In his dreams he had pictured something a whole lot different. Mr. Tarkan had refused him work; Mr. O'Brien had given him a place. Yet, of the two men—— He wondered if Mr. O'Brien always acted that way to his help. He wondered, too, how he would fare under the same roof with Hub Morgan. He did not fear physical conflict. His summer at Mr. Todd's farm had broadened his frame and deepened his muscle. But he suspected that Hub could probably devil him in the numerous ways that an experienced worker can make things unpleasant for the new hand.

The Tarkan-Boylert plant was only one block from the O'Brien machine shop—but Oh! what a difference that one block made.

That night he told his father where he had secured employment. For a moment his father looked at him queerly.

"Are you satisfied with your arrangements, Steve?"

"No, sir," he answered frankly. "But it's the best I can do now."

"I see." Mr. Benton smoothed out a newspaper,

STEVE FINDS THE ROAD

prepared to read, and abruptly laid down the paper. "Don't you think a job in the O'Brien shop is a pretty poor reward for three years of high school? I understand they took in Hub Morgan after he was kicked out of school. Did they?"

"Yes, sir," Steve said weakly. Then he grew rebellious. What was the use, he asked him, of harping on that? Wasn't it better to make the best of things? Could he help it if Mr. Tarkan would not—— He paused suddenly afraid to continue this line of reasoning further.

Monday he went to work. He got to the shop early, acutely afraid to be late this first morning. Few of the men were there. He stood around wondering what to do. A thin, little man with friendly eyes and a nervous manner, came toward him.

"I'm McNally, the shop foreman," he said. "Where's your overalls?"

"I didn't bring any," Steve told him, and wondered if he would have time to go home and get the pair that hung in the Hiding House.

Mr. McNally began to rub his hands apprehensively. "You must have overalls. You'll ruin your clothes. You must have a pair before Mr. O'Brien comes. He won't like it to see you without them. Maybe I can fit you out for to-day."

He went toward the coat-room, and Steve followed a step behind. "Hang up your things," said Mr. McNally, and began to rummage hurriedly

through grease-stained overalls that had been thrown in a corner. "Try these," he said presently. "Quick! I think I hear Mr. O'Brien outside."

Steve donned the garment. It was too big for him, but in his agitation he did not notice that. He left the coat-room, and Mr. McNally explained his duties. There was a great quantity of steel in one corner of the shop, all cast in a small, flat, oblong shape. These he was to carry to the machines at which he had seen boys working the first day he had come to the shop. From these machines, as they were prepared, he carried them to other machines where they went through a second operation, and from these second machines he in turn carried them to the finishing machines. It was a job, Mr. McNally warned him, that would keep a boy on the jump. The machines had to be kept supplied. In between times he was supposed to sweep steel shavings from about the machines and on occasion to send jets of oil into machine parts that had heated from friction.

It was a bewildering sort of job—until one got used to it and reduced it to routine. Steve was kept on the run.

"Come on, you snail," Hub growled at him late in the morning. "You're gumming up the works. Put more life into it or I'll tell Mr. O'Brien."

That was the first sentence Hub had spoken to him, though he had left work at Hub's machine

STEVE FINDS THE ROAD

several times. Thereafter he was careful to see that Hub had no cause for complaint. But before an hour passed Hub was shouting at him to sweep away the shavings that had gathered at his feet. Mr. O'Brien came down and stood glowering while he handled the broom.

"Who told you to wear overalls like that?" the man demanded suddenly. "Didn't they teach you anything at school? Can't you think? That thing's too big for you. Want the pants to billow out and get caught in the machinery? Think I have nothing else to do but pay for accidents? Get a pair that fit you. Hear that? Don't wear those things to-morrow. Hear me?"

Steve said that he heard. He would have had to be around the corner not to hear.

Hub did not speak until Mr. O'Brien had walked away. "I can see your finish here," he said shortly. "You won't last as long as Gabby."

At noon Steve prepared to go home for dinner. But to his dismay he found that the shop took only half an hour to eat. Everybody else had brought a dinner pail. Mr. McNally told him that he could get something in a store down the street. He found the place—a dirty, upset grocery kept by a fat, slouchy man. Sandwiches were spread out on trays, and as they were ordered the shopkeeper pawed them, stuck them in a bag and tossed them across the counter. His hands were not particularly

clean. Steve edged toward the door and came away without buying anything.

That first day came to an end at last. He left the overalls in the coat-room and walked home wearily. He wondered how Gregor was faring at the Tarkan-Boylert plant.

"How did things go?" his father asked him at supper.

"Things are always hard the first day, I guess," Steve answered. The words told just what he had meant them to tell—nothing. He had gone into this thing after due thought and he wasn't going to whine. Besides, hadn't the first five or six days up at Mr. Todd's been hard? He was trying to strangle his doubts.

But at the end of the third week they were stronger and more insistent than at the start. His job had become a dull routine. As his knowledge of his duties had increased, Hub had ceased to bother him. Mr. O'Brien, though, still held him in a sort of terror. He never knew when the owner's wrath would be visited upon him. Time after time he heard men spoken to in a way that shocked his senses and reddened his cheeks. Once or twice he thought he saw Mr. McNally nervously trying to cheer up some workingman who had been violently assailed; but in truth the foreman was himself afraid of the high tempered man who paid his wages.

STEVE FINDS THE ROAD

It had dawned on Steve that, in the big sense, the O'Brien shop made nothing. It merely turned out small parts, and shipped them to bigger plants. It created nothing wholly its own. Could he learn much at such a place? Then, too, he seemed to be standing still. That hurt him worse than anything else. He knew the job; he wanted to progress to one of the machines. Instead, day after day, he was kept in the same dreary treadmill.

Once or twice he had met Gregor in Smoky Hollow. These meetings had usually come at midday, and their intercourse had been limited to a few minutes. He and his father had adopted a sort of truce, and nothing was said about his job. If there was only somebody with whom he could compare notes—— And then, on the fourth Sunday after he had gone to work, Gregor came to the house. He was feeling particularly dispirited that day, but Gregor seemed to be in high spirits.

They talked of their work—that is, Gregor did. He was joyous over the Tarkan-Boylert plant: its drilling, tapping, shaving and riveting machines, its foot and power presses, its turret lathes and automatic screw machines, its core room and its foundry. He spoke of the care with which a special department examined every piece of work for flaws and weaknesses. He had had a week on a lathe. He had had some lessons in reading blueprints and was soon going to be taught how to lay out work.

HIGH BENTON

His voice, vibrant, intensely alive, told the story of his enthusiasm.

Gradually Steve ceased to listen. He was thinking of his own lot. Gregor was going ahead; he was standing still. In his place they had lathes, and presses, and a few other machines. Nothing was inspected. Mr. O'Brien's motto was to let the other fellow pay the cost of inspection. What wasn't right was sent back and credited. And this was the place where he had elected to become such a skilled man that the Tarkan-Boylert Company would send for him.

"I don't want to go on carrying stuff to the machines," he told himself that night. "I'll ask for advancement."

Next morning he broached the subject to Mr. O'Brien. The man regarded him balefully.

"Trying to run my business for me?" he demanded.

"No, sir. But——"

"Didn't I hire you to make yourself useful?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, you're doing it. Get back to your work. You're wasting time."

Steve hesitated. "How—how long will I be kept on carrying——"

"Will you get to work?" Mr. O'Brien bellowed.

He got to work. As the morning advanced a fire of resentment burned in his heart. He had gone

STEVE FINDS THE ROAD

to Mr. O'Brien with what he viewed as a reasonable request. He felt that he had been bully-ragged without reason. The glamor was gone completely from his job. He saw this shop for exactly what it was: a place without system owned by a man glad of a chance to catch the crumbs that fell from the table of the big machinery manufacturers. But little skill was needed in the work the shop did, and its owner had no interest in building up a competent mechanical force. What a time Gregor Helsing's father must have had here trying to perfect his invention!

At noon the hands went outside with their dinner pails and sat in the shade to eat. Steve dropped down beside one of the boys who ran the lathes.

"Old man blew you up to-day, didn't he?" the boy asked curiously. "What did you do, hit him for a raise?"

Steve shook his head. "I wanted him to put me on a machine."

"Fat chance," said the boy. "The machines are all full. You won't have a chance until somebody quits or gets fired. Maybe he wouldn't put you on then if we were rushed. He'd hire somebody who could run a lathe."

"But how about the fellow who wants to get ahead and learn something?" Steve asked.

The boy shrugged his shoulders. "O'Brien should worry."

HIGH BENTON

For a while Steve ate in silence. He fell to wondering how long this boy had been working here and how far he had advanced. He put the thought into words.

"Oh!" said the boy, "I could run a lathe when I came here. He gave me sixteen dollars."

"When was that?"

"Eighteen months ago."

"How much are you getting now?"

"Sixteen dollars," the boy answered in surprise.

"You mean," Steve began slowly, "that in eighteen months you haven't learned anything new or got a single dollar increase, or——"

"And what is that to you?" Mr. O'Brien cried wrathfully from behind him.

Steve startled, stared up into a red, angry face.

"What is it to you?" Mr. O'Brien cried, lashing himself into a fury. "What are you trying to do, start something? Want to give me labor troubles with your talk of not enough money? Why, you——" A string of oaths came from the man's lips.

Steve had heard men cursed before since coming to the shop, but this was the first time the lash of dirty language had been laid across his own self-respect. With a bound he was on his feet. His face had gone white.

"You can't talk to me like that," he said thickly.

"I can't——" Mr. O'Brien's voice became a

STEVE FINDS THE ROAD

roar. "Who's to tell me what I can and can't do in my own shop?"

"You can't curse me," Steve went on as though there had been no interruption. "You can have your job. I wouldn't work here for sixty dollars a week. I treat my dog better than you treat people here. I'm through."

"You're through nothing," Mr. O'Brien cried in a rage. "You're fired. Get your things and clear out. If you give me any back talk I'll throw you out."

Steve went back to the coat-room, took off his overalls, and departed. The men had ceased eating and watched him in silence. Mr. O'Brien delivered a parting tirade, but he paid no attention. His first wild surge of indignation had given place to a feeling of helplessness. A man had spoken to him as he had never expected to be addressed, and he had had to take it. If he had gone to work for Mr. Tarkan— Nobody was cursing at Gregor.

Twice in the last few months he had gone to the old Hiding House as a place of refuge. To-day he went to it again. But instead of sitting in the doorway, he paced the floor restlessly. Four weeks before he had gone forth with high hopes to offer his services. To-day he had been cursed at. The humiliation sent a rush of blinding tears into his eyes. He had not wanted to go to the shop. If

HIGH BENTON

there had been any other job he could have secured——

A light began to break in upon him, a light that brought him to a halt beside one of the windows. There had been no other job for him in the work to which he had turned his heart because he had been fitted for no other job. If he had been fitted for anything better he would not have been there to be cursed at.

He had forgotten that his father had planned to come home early to-day to work in the garden. His back was turned to the wagon road, and he did not see the figure that crossed the old thoroughfare. The sound of a step aroused him and he swung around. His father stood on the threshold of the Hiding House.

Their eyes met. What passed in his father's mind he did not know; but when Mr. Benton spoke his voice was full of sympathy and understanding.

"Trouble at the shop, Steve?"

"Yes, sir. I quit."

"Why?"

"Mr. O'Brien cursed at me."

Mr. Benton's face darkened. "How long has that been going on?"

"It's the first time he did it—to me."

"Was he finding fault with your work?"

"No, sir."

Mr. Benton came into the Hiding House and

STEVE FINDS THE ROAD

stood leaning against the dusty work-bench. "I've often wondered, Steve, what sort of shop O'Brien ran."

"It's a graveyard," Steve answered passionately, "for anybody who's ambitious. They set you doing one thing, and they don't care if you never learn anything else. They don't even check up on whether you do your job right. There's no system, there's no training, there's no high standard of production rigidly lived up to or——"

"How do you know all that?" His father's mouth had switched.

"Why, Gregor's been telling me about the Tarkan-Boylert plant. I could see the difference."

"I thought you had made a mistake when you took the job," Mr. Benton observed, "but it it was a mistake I wanted you to find it out for yourself. What will you do now? Look for another place?"

Steve shook his head. "If I had had nine months more of schooling I could have gone with Mr. Tarkan. That would have been a real job. I could have amounted to something. I didn't have those nine months and I had to go to work in a sloppy shop and get cursed at. That's a pretty stiff price to pay for nine months lack of schooling. I've found that much out."

"So!" his father said softly. There was an interval of silence. "Do you mean, Steve, you're going back to your books in September?"

HIGH BENTON

"I'd be a fool not to," Steve said. "I don't want to hold a graveyard job all my life."

There was another interval of silence.

"Steve," said his father, "that cursing was the best thing that ever happened to you."

"Well," said Steve thoughtfully, "maybe it was. But I don't ever want to get *cursed* at again."

CHAPTER XIII

THE GOAL

AND so, in September, Steve returned to school. The fire of a few months ago was gone. The head-strong desire to dash ahead, to make progress quickly, had given place to a certain calmness and consideration. He had found something of stability and poise. In his impatience to be a man he had remained a boy. Now, coming back to school a boy, he was in many ways a man.

His first days away from the O'Brien shop had been acutely uncomfortable. He had feared to be pointed out through Waterford as a boy who could not hold a place. He had also been a bit ashamed to meet Gregor. But the news that he had refused to be humiliated crept through the town and eased his position, and Gregor seemed to understand and to be glad of what he had done.

"I knew you wouldn't hold it," Gregor said simply. "I know that shop."

Then Steve remembered. Mr. Helsing had worked there in the days when he had been trying to perfect his invention. Another boy, Steve

HIGH BENTON

thought with a warm glow, would have taunted him with a wise "I told you so." But Gregor—— No; Gregor wasn't that kind.

He came back to school at peace with all the world. He was like one who, having struggled through quicksands, had at last reached solid ground. He stood on the fan-shaped stone steps for a moment, and his eyes dwelt with affection on the familiar scene—the dirt road in front of the school, the trees along the way, the houses nestling among green lawns on the other side of the thoroughfare. Suddenly he drew a deep, tremulous breath. Over him there stole the knowledge that he would have missed something final, something rounded and complete, had he not come back for this last year. He walked into the cool, quaintly darkened hall of the building.

"Steve!" cried Mr. Frost. "They told me you had quit, but I knew you better. Did you work during the summer?"

"Part of the time." He did not say where.

"I approve of it," said Mr. Frost. "A little of it opens a boy's eyes. I imagine you learned something from your work."

"I learned how badly I needed another year of high school," Steve said. He fancied that the teacher read what lay behind the words for the man gave him one of the old smiles of comradeship and good cheer.

THE GOAL

"Steve," Mr. Frost said, "nine months from now you'll thank your stars you learned it. So many do not learn the lesson until it is too late. I hope you won't forget the way to my room this year."

"I couldn't do that. You—you've been a big help to me." Steve said it with a certain air of boyish embarrassment.

"Have I?" Mr. Frost asked gently. "Steve, that's what makes teaching worth while."

There was a certain air of stimulation about coming back. Three new subjects were on the year's programme: economics and commercial law, accounting, and physics. Mr. Garfunkel had the physics class—the same abstracted man he had always been but one with whom it was still unsafe to take presumptuous liberties. Mr. Archer taught accounting. Mr. Lane himself expounded economics and commercial law. It was the only class-room subject the principal handled, and the graduating class was the only class he taught.

It was the third day before Steve found himself in Mr. Lane's room. The principal sat forward at the desk, the stiff leg stretched out tensely, the cane hanging from the back of the chair. But the face—— Somehow you lost sight of the infirmity when you looked at the face. For there was revealed a story of triumph over pain, of duty done against odds, of a nature that sore days and nights had failed to sour.

HIGH BENTON

"I think this will be the best subject of the year," Steve told himself.

When the period was over he did not move toward the door with the others. He was sure that in Mr. Lane's eyes there had been a message for him to stay. He stayed, and presently found himself beside the desk, the man's thin, white hand pressed over his.

The day's work was done and for an hour they talked, the dawning manhood of a boy reaching out to an older manhood that shone before it like a beacon. In that hour Mr. Lane spoke of great spirits that had gone before and had left their imprint on the world.

"Stephen," said the principal, "they all sank their teeth into one thing and held on to it. There looms one of the great secrets of success. Learn what you want to do, and then prepare yourself to do it."

That talk left Steve a little gloomy. He knew, and had known, what he wanted to do, but he had been too hasty and had thrown away his chance. Well, he'd never throw away another.

He and Will Adams had adjoining desks in all their periods. Will, too, had become a bit graver. Afternoon after afternoon they walked together, discussing the studies of the day, arguing the questions of the morrow, each taking something of value from his association with the other. The

THE GOAL

Helsings were now living in a better part of Waterford, and often in the evenings Gregor came around to Steve's house and the three boys sat in a group and talked of business and of the rewards it had to offer to those who were qualified.

"It's great," Gregor said fervently, "to be working in a place where everybody has his best foot forward. I know now why Mr. Tarkan won't take a boy who hasn't a high school education. I wouldn't be able to hold up my end if it wasn't for what I learned in high school, and even at that I'm kept hustling."

Steve made no comment.

Mr. Tarkan still came regularly to the house. At first Steve had been constrained during the man's visits, but he soon saw that it was foolish to be bitter where he alone was to blame. Now he could view Mr. Tarkan's appearance with a calm spirit, and in this he was helped by the fact that the manufacturer treated him as though they had never met in an unfortunate interview. If he sometimes became blue with the thought of the mistake he had made, he speedily braced himself with the knowledge that he would never make that sort of mistake again.

The feminine aspect of the class no longer troubled him. If he thought at all about what Gregor had once laughingly called his "petticoat rebellion" it was to be thankful that he now had more

HIGH BENTON

sense. He found economics and commercial law stiffer than political economy. He buried himself in his books and had no time to fret if anybody in the class asked a foolish question. Many of his own questions were far from wise.

In such a busy atmosphere time passed rapidly. Fall gave place to winter, winter slowly gripped Waterford in an icy clutch and then as slowly relaxed that clutch. The snow melted and disappeared and gave place to the regular spring roadways of mud. The first brave buds came forth to bid defiance to the storm gods of the north.

Standing on the high school steps on one of the first warm days of spring Steve suddenly found himself possessed of a new power. It had been years since his father had called him "High Benton," but the meaning of the title was vividly plain. Class by class as he had gone along he had learned, learned, learned. His vision had deepened, his knowledge had broadened. If he had dropped out at the end of the first and second year—— He was appalled at all he would have missed. He would have been like a one-legged runner in a race with whole men. Where were Gabby and Hub and Freckles to-day? Where could they hope to be to-morrow?

This modest, L-shaped, country town school building had given him whatever of value he possessed. Last spring he had wondered to find Gregor

THE GOAL

saddened at the thought of leaving. His own days at Waterford High were nearly done, and now he looked upon his going with regret. This past year had been the happiest of them all.

And those other years—— Bit by bit he could look back now and see how he had been transformed. First a little of this study, then a little of that study, but always a widening of the things that he could understand. Four years ago, on leaving grammar school, he had thought himself very wise. He smiled ruefully at the recollection.

"An eighth grade boy doesn't know anything," he told himself. Later he amended this: "I mean he doesn't know enough to get him any place," he said.

Twice during the year Gregor's salary had been increased. He had followed Gregor's advancement with breathless interest, and had contrasted it to Hub Morgan's stagnation in the O'Brien machine shop. Gregor had built a foundation; Hub had not. Of late he had caught Gregor looking at him with a question in his eyes. He could read the question, but he had ignored it. Gregor was asking was he going to make another try for the Tarkan-Boylert Company. He sighed. How could he? Mr. Tarkan wanted young men who went through high school with a purpose, not young men who hemmed, and hawed, and hesitated. No, his chances there were dead.

Will Adams had made arrangements to go with a

HIGH BENTON

bank in the city as soon as school closed. Steve was undecided about his own destination. His mind was still set on exporting. South America still seemed the golden field. He wanted to sell farm machinery because he believed in it. But where was he to find his opening?

"Time enough for that when examinations are over," said his father.

Nevertheless he began to read the help wanted advertisements in the newspapers. There were all sorts of openings for errand boys, office boys and boys to make themselves generally useful. But the sort of firm he wanted to go with seemed to have all the help it needed.

"People like the Tarkan-Boylert Company don't have to advertise for boys," his father told him. "They have the pick of the best. Patience, Steve; patience."

The pick of the best! And he had thrown his chance away. How could he be patient?

One by one he took his examination subjects. When the last paper had been turned in he seemed to feel that his relationship with the school had been severed. He had finished early, and now he went wandering along the lower hall of the school building. The wide front doors were open, and a vagrant breeze filled the corridor bringing with it the familiar smell of the salt water marsh along Snake river. In one of the class-rooms, deserted

THE GOAL

to-day, he found Miss Cooper standing idly beside a window. He was thinking and did not want to be distracted; but the teacher had seen him pause in the doorway and so he entered the room.

"Examinations over, Mr. Benton?" Miss Cooper asked.

He said that he had just turned in his last paper.

"Have you secured a position yet?"

"I haven't really looked yet." Now that he stood beside her, he thought that she seemed a little thoughtful, a little sad.

"I always get down in the mouth," she said suddenly, "about this time in the year. Students who have been here pass out to take their places in life. All that we can do for them is done. The school has had its chance and is finished. Every year as I see them go I begin pondering. Perhaps we could have done more for this one? Perhaps here was one that we didn't understand or didn't try hard enough to understand. And every year, Mr. Benton, I find myself wishing I could have just one more year to give them."

"But if a student doesn't pick up isn't it his own fault?" Steve asked. It wasn't a smirking inquiry just because he himself had fared well. It was an honest question.

Miss Cooper shook her head. "A whole lot depends upon the teacher. We worry—only a teacher knows how it is possible for a teacher to worry

HIGH BENTON

about a student. Sometimes we know we have succeeded, sometimes we have doubts, sometimes we know we have failed. It's the failures that make us melancholy. Sometimes I blame myself."

Almost before he knew what he had started to say, he found himself telling her of how she had aroused his interest in English and of how she had forced him into a harder study of the language.

"Stephen!" Miss Cooper cried. Her face was radiant. In her excitement she forgot the formal "Mr. Benton." "Did I really do that? Oh, I am so glad."

Steve went home mulling a new thought in his mind. If only boys could learn sooner how teachers felt toward them—in the grades, for instance, instead of late in the high school course! Once he had looked upon Miss Cooper as a pest.

"I guess a fellow just doesn't understand," he said in relating the experience to his father.

Mr. Benton agreed. "There's a lot you understand now, Steve, that you didn't understand a year ago."

The boy nodded. All at once he went inside and consulted the calendar. Just a year ago to-day he had gone to see Mr. Tarkan about that job. If he hadn't been such a pig-headed——

"Come, Steve," his father said at his elbow. "One mistake doesn't make all that difference. The world is full of opportunities."

THE GOAL

"But my heart was set on working there," Steve said gloomily.

He did not worry about his examination marks, nor was he unduly excited when he found that his general average ran a shade over ninety per cent. The announcement of the mark cut the last cord that bound him to school life. Of course, there still remained the business of receiving his diploma, but to all intents and purposes his school life was at an end. After some thought, he wrote to the Chamber of Commerce in the city and asked for the names of the leading manufacturers of farm machinery. Next day he received a short list, and studied it carefully. The Tarkan-Boylert Company came first. He winced. Then he straightened his shoulders and began to consider the others. Friday night he would receive his diploma. Monday he would go out in search of a job. He checked the firm that he thought he would like to try first—made a wry face and put the list away.

Friday night he came to the high school with his mother and his father. The class assembled in the wings of the auditorium stage, nervous, excited, and given to husky whispers. Steve had attended other high school commencements, but this was different—this one was his own. The class saw the guests of honor assemble. And then, at the word, in a fashion stiff and solemn, they walked out on the stage and took their seats.

HIGH BENTON

The programme was long, and very often Steve's thoughts were far away. To-night represented something that he had been working for for four years. They would hand him a piece of paper, just that, but it would mean that he had come through four years as turbulent as any that occurred in the life of a boy. His class had started four years ago with fifty-two members. To-night only fourteen reached their goal. Thirty-eight had fallen by the wayside. It was only by sheer good luck, he thought, that he had come through among the survivors.

He aroused himself to find Mr. Tarkan speaking.

"To-night," Mr. Tarkan said, "means that fourteen of our young men and our young women start life with a foundation upon which they can build. To-night, amid so much failure in the world, fourteen go forth from us with their chance. We, who are in the business world, know how much a high school education means. We see boys fail, and we look up their records and find almost invariably that they did not have the patience to plod along through school. The boy who deliberately throws away his chances to make something of himself——"

Steve blinked his eyes. He had not meant to throw away his chance. It wasn't right to judge him with students like Hub or Gabby. He—— One face on the platform smiled at him. In Mr.

THE GOAL

Frost's glance was the understanding that had always been there. He sat looking down at the floor until Mr. Tarkan had finished.

As from a great distance he heard Mr. Lane's short address. One sentence burned itself into his brain, and repeated itself over and over again. "The world gives to all men the things for which they prepare themselves." Abruptly the haziness lifted and he sat erect. If that was the case, then he could still find his goal. He had prepared.

One by one the class stepped forward and received the precious diploma. Steve held his tightly in his hands. Standing there on the platform his voice grew husky as he joined in the singing of the "Star Spangled Banner." At his elbow Will Adams' voice sounded strange. A moment later the exercises were at an end and the class, students no longer, filed off the stage.

Once behind the wings there was a wild burst of talk. Pent-up emotions overflowed. Steve remembered that he had left two books in his desk in Mr. Lane's room and went up to get them. This classroom had not been used to-night and was dark; some little time elapsed before he found the volumes. When he came downstairs most of the audience had departed. His father and his mother, Mr. Tarkan and Mr. Lane stood talking in the doorway. As he came up to them his father and mother

HIGH BENTON

walked down the steps. Mr. Tarkan held out his hand.

"Congratulations, Steve."

He found the meeting awkward, and was ill at ease. He was thinking of another interview just a year before.

"Coming in to see me Monday?" Mr. Tarkan asked.

Monday? He looked at the man in surprise.

"You're a high school graduate now, Steve. Of course, if you have made other plans——"

He was so overwhelmed that it was with a grateful sense he felt Mr. Lane's hand on his shoulder. The principal's deep-set eyes surveyed him with a kindly light.

"You've earned it, Stephen," Mr. Lane said. "I thought we were going to lose you once or twice, but you always overcame your difficulties."

"Steve," said Mr. Tarkan, "did you think we stopped watching you because you were wobbling a bit?"

A wild song of happiness sang in Steve's heart. What he said to Mr. Tarkan sounded incoherent, but he made it plain that he would be at the plant Monday morning. He turned away, swung around all at once, and held out one of the books to Mr. Lane.

"Would you keep this, sir as—as a remembrance?" he asked.

THE GOAL

The principal's face grew wonderfully soft. "I would treasure it, Stephen." His fingers gripped the boy's hand for a silent moment. "Good luck," he said.

"Don't forget," Mr. Tarkan called; "Monday morning."

Steve laughed shakily. Forget? Just as though he could forget. He saw his father waiting half way down the street and he broke into a run to tell the good news.

(23)

CENTRAL CIRCULATION
CHILDREN'S ROOM

